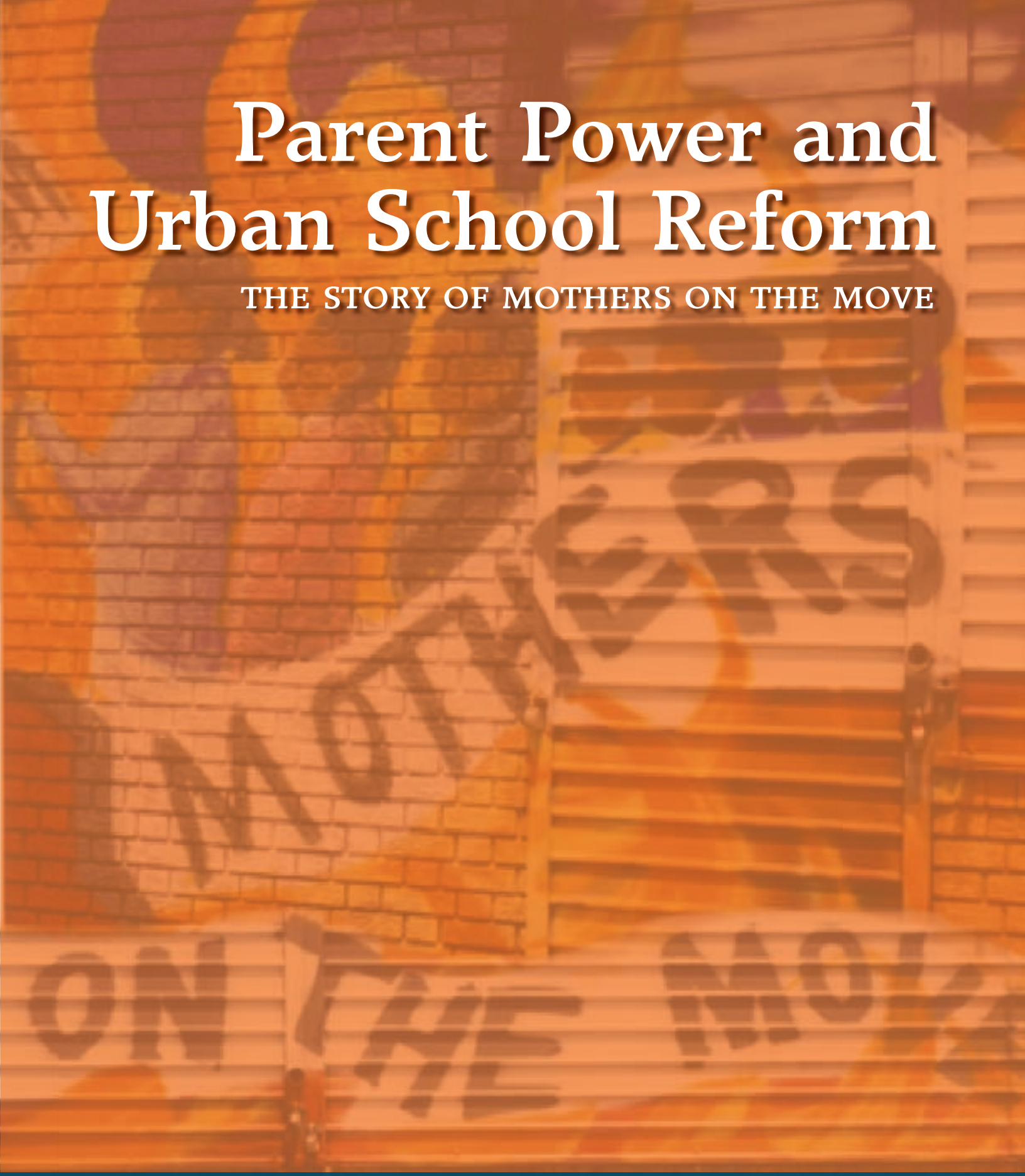

Parent Power and Urban School Reform

THE STORY OF MOTHERS ON THE MOVE

Institute for Education and Social Policy
Steinhardt School of Education, New York University

November 2003

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ABOUT THE COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT PROGRAM

This report was produced by the Institute's Community Involvement Program (CIP). CIP was initiated in 1996 to support community organizing for school reform. CIP provides support to community groups organizing parents and young people to improve their schools, as well as to groups collaborating to shape more effective and equitable education policies in New York City and in major cities in the northeast. We also conduct research on school reform organizing nationally.

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Photographs courtesy of Mothers On The Move

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INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION AND SOCIAL POLICY
STEINHARDT SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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We are also grateful to former New York City Schools Chancellors Rudy Crew and Ramon Cortines, and Community School District 8 Superintendent Betty Rosa for their comments and insights. This story could not have been told without their contributions.

A special thank you to Barbara Taveras and Lori Bezahler, of the Edward W. Hazen Foundation, whose leadership and financial support have been critical not just to this paper, but also to the organizing it describes.

FOREWARD

Parent Power and Urban School Reform offers organizers, educators, reformers and political theorists a compelling and complex case study of the strengths and potential of rigorous, community-based parent organizing. Written in ways that are vivid and inspiring, the history of Mothers On the Move (MOM) reveals the profound need for multi-issue organizing; the radical potential for activist research to reveal the fractures and contours of social injustice, and the stubborn bureaucratic refusal to engage democratically with working class communities of color. This biography of organizing is not a pretty glossy; the story reveals the sweat, struggle, despair, tears, false victories and the wins of a group of well organized, fearless, and dedicated activist mothers.

Ten years ago, with the caring wisdom and leadership of Mili Bonilla and Barbara Gross, a core of mothers from the Bronx decided that they and their children deserved more, and organized to get it. Told as a journey of ongoing struggle, the monograph documents a cautionary tale about the power and limits of inside-outside strategies; the need for both ambitious macro analyses and deep local door-knocking work; the thorny relation of community critique and support for public education, and the always fragile if essential coalitions of parents, community and educators. Reading this, you will have no doubt that good schooling requires engaged, mouthy, pushy, exhausted and never-giving up Moms, working with educators who dare to dream and create what must be.

The story of MOM inspires, educates, and enrages. While this document is gorgeous in its local, Bronx particularities, there are lessons to be mined for parent organizing across urban America, and even into the suburbs and rural communities. Filled with data, T-shirts, signs, charts, slogans, threats, fearless tactics, pins and generations of mother-wit, MOM speaks back to the conscience of America with organizing brilliance, a sense of victory, humor, despair, possibility and outrage.

This monograph is a must-read for organizers and educators. It is, also, a wonderful gift for anyone who dreams that perhaps, in our lifetime, every child could breath clean air, be educated amidst books and respect, live in a safe and loving neighborhood, enjoy the comfort that police will protect, and that every child could giggle her way through a life of freedom, growing up to contribute to a nation of justice.

In the powerful ripples of the everyday moves of a group of women, a world of radical possibilities burst open in the Bronx. Victory was never secure, justice never guaranteed, struggle never over, but these women inspire us to see that with collective critique, organizing and commitment, possibility lies just around the corner in Hunts Point.

Michelle Fine
Distinguished Professor of Psychology
Graduate Center of the City University of New York
August 2003

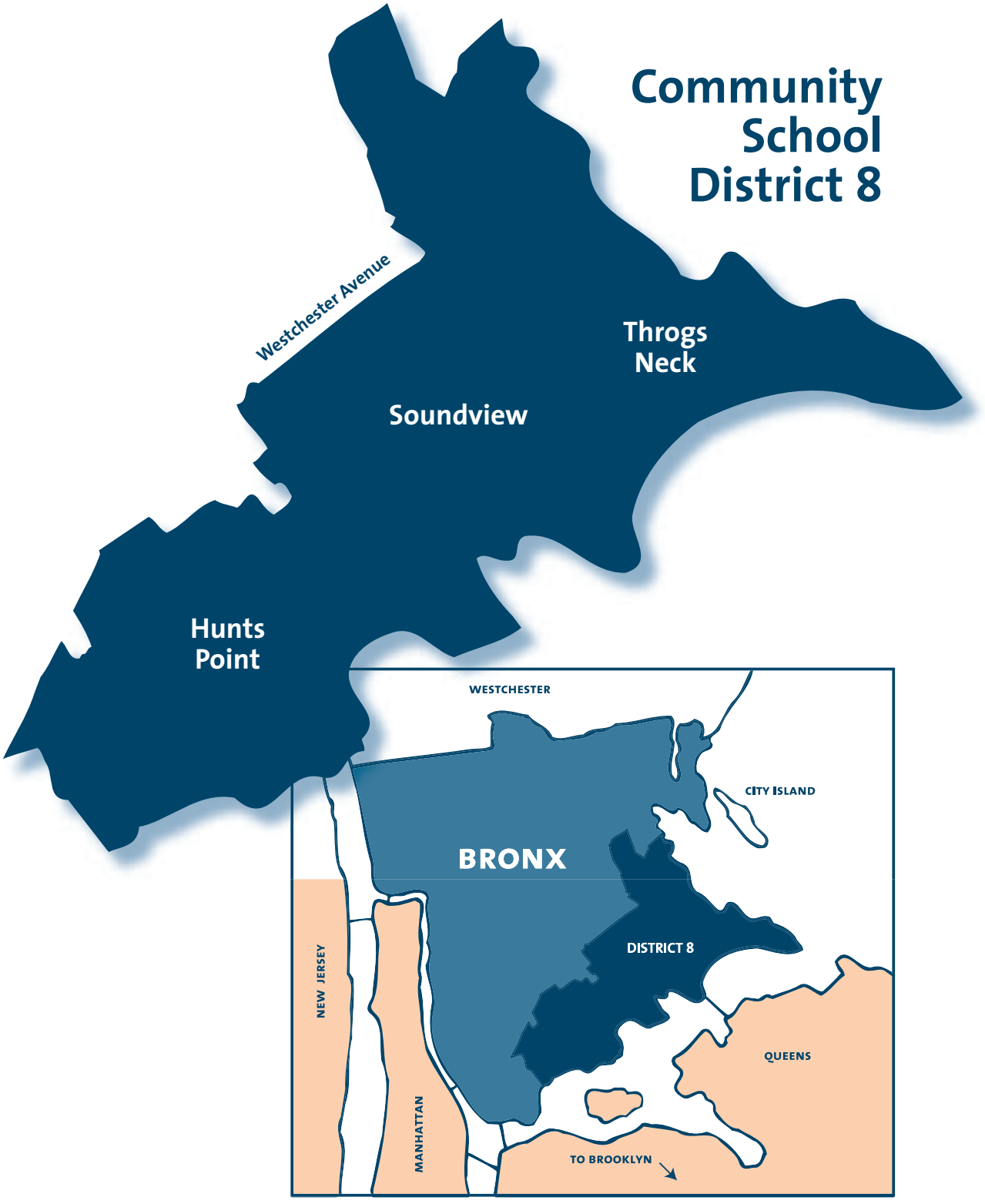


FIGURE 1 **Community School District 8 Neighborhoods**

Community School District 8 has three distinct neighborhoods: Hunts Point (which includes Hunts Point, Longwood and Intervale Valley), Soundview and Throgs Neck.

INTRODUCTION

On a late afternoon in October 1991, a group of adult students at Bronx Educational Services (BES) struggled with a novel literacy assignment. That day, in an exercise designed to provide a real life context for learning, BES students looked up their children's schools on the *New York Times* annual ranking of the city's public schools by reading and math test scores. They grew somber as they absorbed the information that schools in their section of the South Bronx were among the lowest performing schools in the city. Most of the BES students were drawn to the program by the promise of improved reading and writing skills, and the opportunity to get a job and shape a better life for themselves and their children. The data left them shaken.

Their teacher, Barbara Gross, had a background in community organizing – she had been an ACORN organizer in the early 1980's before coming to BES, a community-based provider of adult educational programs. As a teacher and program director at BES, she was frustrated by the limitations of working in a neighborhood-based literacy program without addressing the failures of the surrounding public schools, which had contributed to the need for adult literacy programs. Gross hoped to provoke her students to ask critical questions about what the *Times'* rankings illustrated.

Her BES students were upset and then outraged by the data, which showed that barely one in four children could read at grade level in Hunts Point schools, while other schools in Community School District 8 seemed much more successful. The students began discussing what they could do. Over the next ten years, these students, along with hundreds of Hunts Point residents, would organize through Mothers On the Move (MOM) to expose local school failure, and to challenge district policies and politics that condoned the disparity of educational outcomes between Hunts Point and its more affluent neighbors.

This case study traces Mothers On the Move's struggle to improve Hunts Point schools, from its beginnings at BES, through its ouster of long time community school district superintendent Max Messer, to its struggles with the new district superintendent. We profile MOM's organizing achievements, and discuss the challenges and dilemmas that faced the

The Hunts Point Neighborhood

Located in the southeast corner of the Bronx, the Hunts Point area encompasses the predominantly black and Latino neighborhoods of Hunts Point, Longwood and Intervale Valley. Surrounded by the East River on three sides, Hunts Point lies directly south and west of the more affluent Bronx neighborhoods of Soundview and Throgs Neck. A vibrant mix of diverse immigrant cultures, Hunts Point has experienced an economic resurgence over the past decade, marked by the influx of new business and the development of several thousand new and rehabilitated housing units. Yet according to a 2003 report on neighborhood conditions, over a third of Hunts Point residents receive some form of income support from city, state or federal sources, and children in the area have the highest asthma hospitalization rates in New York City. Moreover, the report notes, "nearly 50% of the city's sludge and 40% of Manhattan's commercial waste is processed and transported through Hunts Point, [making] wind blown trash, foul and acrid odors, waste spills, illegal dumping and rodent infestation...daily facts of life for residents. Though the peninsula contains the Hunts Point wholesale market, and supplies fresh fish, meat and produce to restaurants throughout NYC, its residents have absolutely no access to these goods. There is no fish store in Hunts Point, no butcher shop and only one small produce operation."

Community Planning Board 4,
"FY 2004 Statement of Community District Needs."

"Groups like MOM are absolutely essential. I don't think you can bring about whole system reform without groups that have a clear methodology for advocacy. If I went to another district as a superintendent, I would try to find out who these people were and work with them. They can help you size up the problem."

— Former New York City Schools Chancellor Rudolph Crew

organization in the period following Messer's departure. Our study is based on interviews conducted between June 2002–2003 of MOM members and staff, as well as of the Chancellors and superintendent who presided during much of MOM's organizing. In developing our analysis, we conducted extensive archival research of news media coverage and internal documents produced over the course of MOM's work. We also examined data obtained from the New York City Board of Education (now the city Department of Education) regarding changes in Hunts Point and District 8 schools. Our findings demonstrate that MOM's organizing played a pivotal role in forcing numerous critical changes in the district, from exposing election fraud to forcing the Chancellor's intervention in the district's superintendent selection process. New York City Department of Education data show that the improvements set in motion through MOM's organizing for leadership change are beginning to bear fruit in some Hunts Point schools. For example, fourth grade reading scores at Public School 62, where MOM began its organizing, increased by over fifty percent, from 22% meeting the state standard in 1999 to 36% meeting the standard in 2003.

Our analysis of MOM's work suggests that successful school reform organizing requires an effective working relationship with educators based on accountability, and an educational strategy based on both an assessment of local school failure and knowledge of how low performing schools can improve. As MOM's early years make clear, organizing can indeed disrupt and transform the paternalistic relationships that exist between too many urban public schools and their poor, predominantly non-white and often immigrant communities. The post-Messer improvement at PS 62, a school that had languished during Messer's reign, reinforces a basic, and yet, controversial truth: improving student outcomes for poor children of color begins with building the parent and community power necessary to hold school systems accountable.

"Before, we were in the backseat, stereotyped as barefoot and pregnant, like we take care of children and therefore we're not powerful. It was the opposite with MOM. If you wore that yellow MOM button people were afraid of you, from the principal on up to the superintendent. When you can just walk into a room and see people get nervous, that is power. MOM broke the stereotype about mothers. This was a totally brand new thing."

— Lisa Ortega, MOM member and organizer

Unmasking School Failure

MOM'S BEGINNINGS

After they absorbed the startling data about dismal student performance in the South Bronx schools, the first impulse of the students at BES was to urge their neighborhood's children to work harder in school. "Adult learners of reading and writing were some of the most determined people I ever met," Gross recalls. "They felt if they had been more determined in school they could have learned more – that it didn't really matter how bad the schools were, if you were determined enough you could learn." Their opportunity came when BES attended a National Literacy Day program in a local school. During their visit, BES students made an appointment to meet a fourth grade class.

On the scheduled day, eight members of Gross' BES literacy class returned to the school to speak to the fourth graders. What they saw changed their views of how to improve low reading scores, Gross recalls. Forty children sat in straight rows. Most were bored – talking to each other or staring vacantly into space. The teacher introduced BES to her students saying, "You better listen to these people or you'll grow up to be like your parents, on welfare." "Maybe you can get through to them," she said to the BES group. "No one else can."

When the BES group left the class they no longer believed that student lack of motivation was to blame for the low reading scores. They were angry and upset about the teacher's attitude toward her students, the size of the class, and the students' obvious boredom. They resolved to talk to the students' parents, hoping that if parents understood what was going on in their school, they would demand improvements. The idea for a parent organizing group emerged from that discussion.

BES students and staff began researching ways to begin education organizing. At the time few community groups were organizing to improve public schools. ACORN (Association of Communities Organized for Reform Now), along with the teachers' union, parents associations, and advocacy groups throughout the city, was leading a "Save Our Schools" campaign to stave off disastrous fiscal cuts to New York City schools. Lack of resources clearly affected Hunts Point schools, and though BES students attended some Save Our Schools meetings, the issue seemed too complex for the BES students to tackle locally as a first step.

During this time, the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation was funding a parent involvement project at Public School (PS) 62 in Hunts Point, one of the ten lowest performing elementary schools in the city. The project was struggling and the foundation, learning of BES' work in the community, asked BES for help.

In February 1992, the BES students formed the Parent Organizing and Education Project (POEP), with Gross' support, and began meeting with parents at PS 62. Gross worked on the project part-time and, along with the literacy students, interviewed candidates for full-time and part-time organizer positions. The full-time organizer they

What is Organizing?

Though the term organizing is used in many ways, neighborhood-based school reform organizing groups generally share the following characteristics:

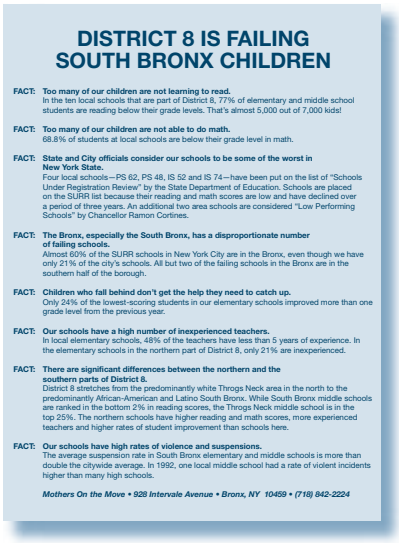
1. A base of parents, youth, or neighborhood residents who engage in collective action to address issues related to poor performance and inequities in local public schools, and whose vision includes excellent and equitable public schools for all children;

2. A focus on winning concrete changes in school policy and practice, using a variety of strategies including mobilization, direct action, negotiation, training, and working in coalitions;

3. A structure that supports and encourages democratic decision-making by group members in all aspects of the organization, including decision-making about issues, strategies, tactics, and vision;

4. A process for engaging in ongoing recruitment of new members and consistent development of leadership from within the membership base; and

5. A commitment to building a strong and lasting organizations dedicated to altering the power relations that produce failing schools in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods and communities of color.



DISTRICT 8 IS FAILING SOUTH BRONX CHILDREN

FACT: Too many of our children are not learning to read.
In the ten local schools that are part of District 8, 77% of elementary and middle school students are reading below their grade levels. That's almost 5,000 out of 7,000 kids!

FACT: Too many of our children are not able to do math.
68.8% of students at local schools are below their grade level in math.

FACT: State and City officials consider our schools to be some of the worst in New York State.
Four local schools—PS 62, PS 48, IS 52 and IS 74—have been put on the list of "Schools Under Registration Review" by the State Department of Education. Schools are placed on the SURR list because their reading and math scores are low and have declined over a period of three years. An additional two area schools are considered "Low Performing Schools" by Chancellor Ramon Cortines.

FACT: The Bronx, especially the South Bronx, has a disproportionate number of failing schools.
Almost 60% of the SURR schools in New York City are in the Bronx, even though we have only 21% of the city's schools. All but two of the failing schools in the Bronx are in the southern half of the borough.

FACT: Children who fall behind don't get the help they need to catch up.
Only 24% of the lowest-scoring students in our elementary schools improved more than one grade level from the previous year.

FACT: Our schools have a high number of inexperienced teachers.
In local elementary schools, 48% of the teachers have less than 5 years of experience. In the elementary schools in the northern part of District 8, only 21% are inexperienced.

FACT: There are significant differences between the northern and the southern parts of District 8.
District 8 stretches from the predominantly white Throgs Neck area in the north to the predominantly African-American and Latino South Bronx. While South Bronx middle schools are ranked in the bottom 2% in reading scores, the Throgs Neck middle school is in the top 25%. The northern schools have higher reading and math scores, more experienced teachers and higher rates of student improvement than schools here.

FACT: Our schools have high rates of violence and suspensions.
The average suspension rate in South Bronx elementary and middle schools is more than double the citywide average. In 1992, one local middle school had a rate of violent incidents higher than many high schools.

Mothers On the Move • 928 Intervale Avenue • Bronx, NY 10459 • (718) 842-2224

FIGURE 2

District 8 is failing South Bronx children

Mothers On the Move used data about their schools to recruit parents into the organization.

hired, Mili Bonilla, was a South Bronx native and former organizer for South Bronx People for Change, a community organization that had fought to improve housing and environmental conditions in the Bronx during the 1980s. The character of POEP (which became MOM) was shaped by the organizing background Bonilla and Gross shared; they defined MOM not as an advocacy or self-help group, but as a member-controlled community organization focused on improving the public schools. They wanted MOM to build a power base among parents and community residents strong enough to force the school system to be accountable. The role of MOM organizers was, Bonilla recalls, to recruit people from the neighborhood to join the organization, and to make sure they had the information and skills necessary to develop school improvement campaigns. As people became active members, the organizer's role was to challenge them to take on more critical leadership roles.

MOM organizers began recruiting by knocking on doors to ask parents about their experiences with PS 62. Organizers provided the reading scores that had inspired BES students to take action; the scores showed that, in the 1991–1992 school year, only 18.6% of PS 62 students were reading at grade level.[1] In 1989, PS 62 had been placed on the New York State Education Department's list of SURR schools (Schools Under Registration Review) because it had consistently failed to meet minimum reading and math standards and ranked among the lowest performing schools in the state.

Organizers discovered that parents were unaware of PS 62's problems. They knew their own children were struggling, but they hadn't realized the school itself was doing so poorly. The data changed their attitudes; learning about the school's dismal academic performance "sparked anger and interest to join," Bonilla recalls. Soon thirty to forty people were regularly attending MOM meetings, discussing how to tackle the conditions in their children's school.

1 Data source: NYC Board of Education.

Parents began by sharing their stories. The first problems they brought up, remembers Bonilla, were very basic: the school building was in disrepair. Children were not allowed to bring their textbooks home. The school lacked basic classroom supplies, and teachers used the playground as a parking lot. Whenever parents raised these problems individually, teachers and administrators virtually ignored them or reacted defensively.

Not only were school officials unresponsive to parents and the community, they also blamed parents for the school's poor performance. PS 62 served a large number of children from nearby homeless shelters, and district administrators seemed to believe that given its population, failure was inevitable. In an interview with *New York Newsday,* District Superintendent Max Messer justified the poor performance of South Bronx schools, saying "It's demographics. It's societal."[2] Because many teachers and administrators perceived parents and community residents as largely responsible for the school's poor academic performance, they reflexively dismissed parents' suggestions for solutions. "They treated us like we were kids — like we were uneducated and knew nothing about anything," recalls MOM member Lucretia Jones. "We were expected to turn over our children to them and hope for the best."

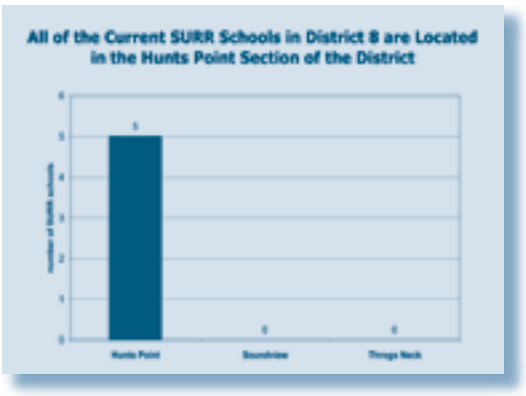


FIGURE 3

SURR schools in District 8

All of the SURR schools in District 8 are located in the southern portion of the district. SURR schools are those schools identified as being the lowest performing schools in the state by the New York State Department of Education. The Commissioner of Education may close or order the redesign of SURR schools that do not make adequate improvement within three full school years. This data presentation was prepared for MOM by the IESP.

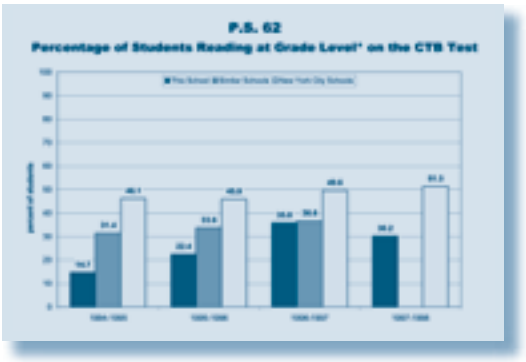


FIGURE 4

PS 62 students reading at grade level

This graph shows the percentage of PS 62 students reading at grade level on the CTB test. "At grade level" describes the level of reading achieved by half of the students in this grade who took the CTB test nationwide. The IESP used data provided by the New York City Board of Education to develop this data presentation for MOM.

Early MOM meetings gave many parents their first experience of talking about their children's schooling with other parents. Through these discussions, they learned that the problems they and their children had encountered were not unique. Many had blamed themselves and their children for their negative experiences in South Bronx schools, but hearing other parents' stories convinced them that the locus of the problems was in the school. "We realized," remembers Jones, that "if a majority of students are not reading on level then that's a failure of the school as well as the student."

MOM members met across the street from PS 62 in a community room of a residential building. Meeting outside the school gave parents a safe space to discuss their concerns without fear of being overheard by school staff or administrators. Lisa Ortega, a mother of three and a MOM member who later joined the staff recalls, "There was such unity in those meetings. There would be personality types that I would never ever associate

2 *New York Newsday,* Jan 24, 1993.

with, they wouldn't be my type of people, but in this room, we were so equal and really together that it was something new for me to see that happen."

Parents shared their children's experience and participated in workshops. Led by Gross and Bonilla and other invited guests, the workshops introduced parents to the governance structure of the school system, reviewed school performance data, and explored the power of parent organizing. The sessions were participatory – each topic was discussed in the context of members' experiences.

Not only were school officials unresponsive to parents and the community, they also blamed parents for the school's poor performance.

From the beginning, member-control was a defining characteristic of the organization. During weekly or biweekly meetings, members analyzed the underlying causes of problems in their schools, and they developed organizing campaigns – conducting research and planning actions – to pressure local officials to resolve their concerns. Because leadership development was a key goal of MOM's work, organizing staff were not permitted to speak publicly for the organization, negotiate with public officials, or run internal membership meetings. Instead, they provided intensive support to prepare members to take on these new roles. They met with members individually and in groups to brainstorm agendas, draft and rehearse talking points, practice negotiating with education officials, and evaluate their performance and the group's progress after each event.

Through the workshops and meetings, MOM members – many of whom were initially intimidated by school officials – began to feel confident about challenging the schools. "You might come into MOM as a timid little person," says MOM member Carolyn Pelzer, "but if you hung around long enough, you would become one of the most outspoken leaders there ever was." Lisa Ortega recalls, "I had never ever been in a place where I felt so powerful. I was used to getting services, but MOM was different. People were saying, 'Wow, you have so much to give, your kids go to school, you're an expert on this. You need to be speaking, what do you want to say?'"

Early MOM meetings gave many parents their first experience of talking about their children's schooling with other parents.

TACKLING PS 62

With funding support from the Edna McConnell Clark and Aaron Diamond Foundations, MOM began organizing to improve student learning at PS 62 and, through the parent meetings, developed a proposal for improving the school's outcomes, based on parents' experiences and ideas for reform. They requested a meeting with PS 62's principal to present and discuss these ideas, and invited the Parent Association (PA) president to attend. To prepare for meeting with the school officials, MOM members held a planning session to discuss how they would present concerns to the principal.

The planning session was tense from the moment it began. The PA president and the principal showed up unexpectedly. When MOM members pressed them to leave and allow them time to finish planning, the principal became visibly agitated and left the room. Members believed "she was not used to parents being so assertive and developing proposals for how the school should be run," Gross says. "Until that point, there hadn't been schools organizing in the neighborhood, or almost anywhere in the city for many, many years. When Mili and I started knocking on doors, people were excited, there was so much energy and hope. We had 30–40 people coming to the meetings."

After this meeting, MOM organizing began encountering hostility and sabotage. Flyers were torn down, and new bogus ones appeared canceling their meetings. Rumors circulated that MOM members beat up teachers, stole Parent Association money and had a secret agenda. Some MOM members who were active in the PS 62 PA discovered they were unwelcome at Parent Association meetings.

In addition to the harassment, members feared that the school would take revenge by punishing their children. Pelzer remembers, "Parents were afraid of speaking out for fear of something happening to their child, like being suspended or being put in one of the worst classes in the school." The stress so early on in the organizing led many members to leave the group.

By spring, 1992, after only a few months of organizing, Bonilla, Gross and many of the parent members began to question the wisdom of focusing on only one school. The hostility they were encountering at PS 62 would make it difficult to bring in new members. Moreover, through their door-knocking across the neighborhood, they were learning about other school

Leveraging Change through Data

As the standards movement swept across the nation during the 1990s, many states and localities began developing reporting systems that pressured low performing schools to improve. Such data included achievement scores, attendance, suspensions, teacher experience and attendance, graduation and dropout rates. New York City was one of the first urban districts to make school demographic and performance data available through annual school report cards, which had been developed in conjunction with Data Consortium researchers. While these data were available, they were not necessarily accessible – few parents knew they could request data about their school's performance, and even fewer could make sense of the data when they received them.

By the mid-1990s, community organizing groups in New York City were gaining access to district and school level data through the Data Consortium and, later, the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy (IESP). Organizers began integrating data presentations into their organizing. School performance data were used to show members that the academic failure they had previously blamed on themselves or their children was linked to systemic problems inside the schools. Data were used to identify the factors contributing to school failure, such as high teacher turnover, inequitable spending among schools or districts, or school overcrowding, and to build pressure for reform. The data also enabled groups to monitor their schools' progress towards improvement.

problems from parents with children in more than one school. These stories, along with the widespread failure across South Bronx schools revealed by the *New York Times* ranks list, suggested that PS 62's failures stemmed from district problems that could not be addressed by working school by school.

District 8 Junior High Schools

	THROGS NECK	SOUNDVIEW	SOUTH BRONX	DISTRICT	CITYWIDE
Total registered students, 1992	964	3,503	2,047	6,514	192,793
Average #/school	964	930	750		
Percent of student population that is in special education	9.54	9.21	14.80	11.26	7.7
Poverty Index	50.7	78.66	93.86	81.40	64.3
Percentage generating Chapter 1 money for school (eligible for remedial services)	23.50	34.73	58.84	40.70	36.60
Percentage students in Free Lunch Program	50.2	72.96	88.18	74.4	59.9
Percent 5th grade students testing out of LEP	26.10	6.14	3.78	4.0	7.0
Percentage Black students	18.6	39.68	26.02	32.40	36.3
Percentage Latino	27.0	56.23	73.69	57	35.6
Percentage White	53.40	1.18	.12	10.36	19.2
Percentage immigrants	2.00	7.08	6.40	6.10	14.40
Mobility rate	22.10	29.02	41.31	32.30	27.4
Percentage of teachers with 1 - 5 years experience	17.50	18.98	44.79	27.9	26.8
Percentage of teachers with 6 - 10 years experience	14.30	18.23	14.41	16.60	16.8
Percent of teachers appointed	87.30	81.35	59.42	74.5	79.0
Teachers with provisional certification	3.20	4.74	6.11	5.0	3.8
Teachers who are provisional prepatory	9.50	13.90	34.45	20.5	17.2
Average salary	44,064	43,173.64	37,982.52	41,398	41,785

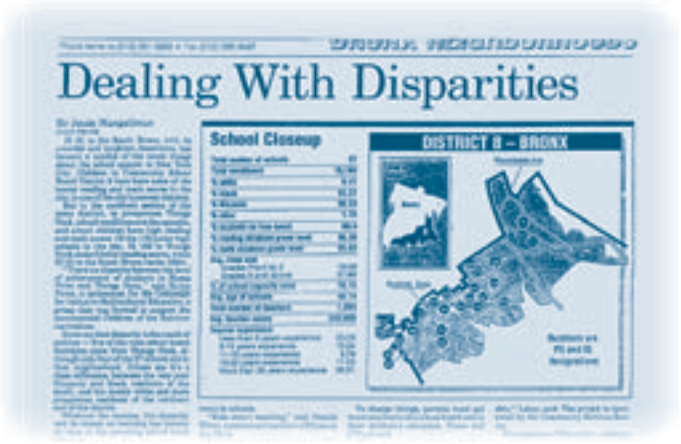
FIGURE 5 **Junior High Schools in District 8**

Drawing the New York City Board of Education's School Profile reports, researchers at the NYU-sponsored Data Consortium provided MOM with reports on District 8 schools. MOM used these data to expose the disparities in student achievement and school performance across District 8 schools.

DEVELOPING A DISTRICT ANALYSIS

Through a suggestion from one of MOM's funders, MOM contacted researchers at New York University for more information about their district. The newly created New York University-sponsored Data Consortium had begun collecting demographic and performance data on the city's schools produced by the Board of Education.[3] The Data Consortium began providing MOM with data reports about District 8 schools.

The District 8 data revealed a dramatic, previously undocumented story. Organizers and members had known that Hunts Point schools were far worse than Throgs Neck and Soundview schools, but the extent of the disparity in performance and resources was shocking. Schools in the northern part of District 8 (comprising all of Throgs Neck and most of Soundview) had twice as many children reading at grade level as did Hunts Point schools.[4] The District's successful schools were located mostly in the Throgs Neck neighborhood. From a district perspective, these high-performing schools masked the failure of Hunts Point schools by raising the district's test score average. Though Hunts Point schools were among the lowest performing schools in the city, when they were lumped together with Throgs Neck schools, the district appeared to be performing above the city average. Aggregating and averaging scores concealed the reality of radically unequal performance in the district.


Dealing With Disparities

School Closeup

DISTRICT 8 – BRONX

These data supported what parents knew anecdotally, and helped them to see poor achievement scores as an institutional rather than personal failure. The new information transformed MOM's work. District 8's performance data suggested that the poor quality of neighborhood schools resulted not simply from the failings of individual schools, but from the persistent failure of district and city leadership to intervene to invest in and improve their schools. Schools in the north, for example, were consistently allocated more experienced and credentialed teachers. Though many South Bronx schools were in severely dilapidated condition, including one in which an entire floor was closed due to water damage, the only major construction project in District 8 in 1993 was a $5 million addition to a Throgs Neck school.[5]

To understand why these district-wide disparities existed, MOM conducted an analysis of power in the school system. In 1992, elementary and middle schools were run by 32 locally elected Community School Boards who appointed District Superintendents, and were responsible for approving the budget, hiring principals and planning for school

3 The Consortium was created by researchers from several universities and advocacy groups, and was housed in NYU's Wagner School of Public Administration. It moved to the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy in 1994, where it expanded to become a repository for the New York City school system's budget, expenditure, demographic and performance data.

4 Data source: New York City Board of Education

5 *Newsday,* Jan 24 1993.

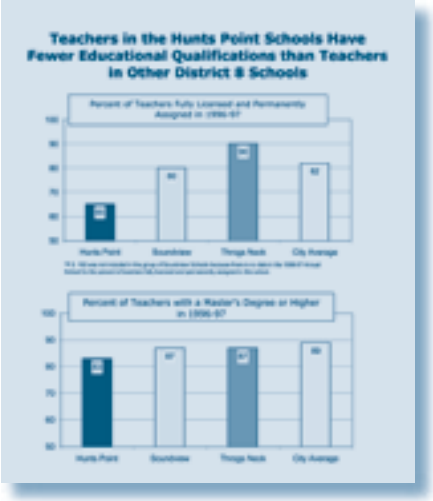


FIGURE6

Teacher qualifications in District 8 schools

Hunts Point schools have fewer teachers who are licensed and permanently assigned, and fewer teachers with a master's degree or higher. This analysis is based on data provided by the New York City Board of Education, and was prepared for MOM by the IESP.

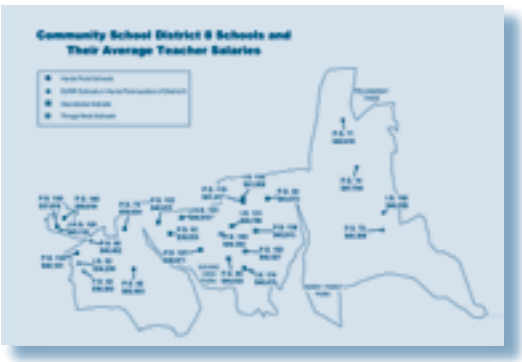


FIGURE 7

Average teacher salaries in District 8 schools

This map shows average teacher salaries for all District 8 schools. This data presentation was developed for MOM by the IESP and draws on data from the New York City Board of Education School-based Expenditure Reports.

improvement. The Central Board of Education oversaw high schools and other citywide functions, such as special education, maintenance, food services and transportation. Although only four of District 8's twenty–seven schools were located in Throgs Neck, five of nine school board members were elected from that neighborhood. The predominantly white, middle-class residents of Throgs Neck were politically well connected and had longstanding relationships with school district officials. As one district official explained to *New York Newsday*, "The power structure is in the north and schools there get the most attention."[6]

Exposing the disparities in resources and performance between schools in the north and south of District 8 became a central focus of MOM's work. By the mid–1990s, the Data Consortium had moved to the NYU Institute for Education and Social Policy, where researchers worked with organizers to develop graphic presentations of the Board of Education's data that showed the disparity in achievement between Hunts Point, Soundview and Throgs Neck by clustering reading and math scores by neighborhood. MOM organizers turned these graphs into flyers, and distributed them to parents in the South Bronx. MOM members also used these statistics in meetings with district officials to support their demands for reform.

As members compared statistics on school performance, they began to frame their struggle in explicitly political terms. "We were not just fighting about teachers' cars in schoolyards. We were fighting an underlying and pervasive contempt for children in our community." Lucretia Jones explains, "School officials blamed the failure on the students, saying that because we have the shelters, that's why the students weren't doing as well. But one of the first things that bothered me was that even in a so-called gifted program, my son didn't have Spanish books, he didn't have a science lab. It was obvious why. The schools in our neighborhood serve poor children of color. Throgs Neck served the opposite. We understood that that was why our schools were allowed to fail."

In July 1992, almost six months after MOM was founded, MOM invited District Superintendent Max Messer and the Community School Board to a meeting, held at a local church (they could not gain access to PS 62), to discuss MOM's concerns about the poor educational performance and resource inequity in the district. It was MOM's first big public event, and the staff sent out press releases to publicize the organization and

6 *New York Newsday,* January 24, 1993.

articulate their concerns. Through the membership meetings, the organization had developed a school improvement agenda for the district. MOM demanded that:

- Reading and math scores and skills be improved;
- All building repairs that threaten the safety of children be completed before the school year begins;
- Board members develop a policy on parental involvement and parental decision-making in the schools;
- Additional security guards and nurses be provided;
- Board members redefine their view of a traditional family and implement the complete "Children of the Rainbow" curriculum.[7]

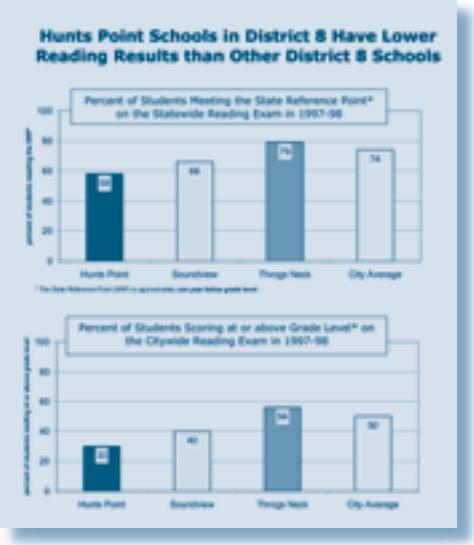


FIGURE 8 **Reading results in Hunts Point schools vs. other District 8 schools.**

Hunts Point schools in District 8 have lower reading results than other District 8 schools. The first graph shows the percent of students meeting the State Reference Point on the statewide reading exam. The State Reference Point is approximately one year below grade level. The second graph shows the percent of students scoring at or above grade level on the citywide reading exam. Grade level indicates the score above which exactly half of the students in a national sample score on the reading exam. These presentations are based on data provided by the New York City Board of Education, and were prepared for MOM by the IESP.

One hundred MOM members, including adult learners from BES, came to the meeting at St. Athanasius Church, but neither Superintendent Messer nor the school board appeared. Calling the meeting to order, members decided that, "if they wouldn't come to us, we would go to them," Bonilla recalls. Piling into cabs, they drove to the district superintendent's office, followed by the press that had come to cover the now-abandoned meeting. At the district office, MOM members filled the rooms and hallways, demanding that the superintendent meet with them. The takeover drew extensive media coverage. Though Messer was not in the building, MOM members spoke with his two deputy superintendents before leaving the district office with the promise to return.

This protest "put MOM on the map, both externally and internally," remembers Gross. "It changed people's perceptions of themselves." "That's when the district began taking us seriously," recalls MOM member Jesse McDonald. From that day on, direct action became an important tactic that MOM used to achieve its goals. By combining creative forms of public protest and media outreach, MOM gained visibility and credibility as an important voice in the community. With the threat of another district office protest, MOM forced the superintendent to agree to a meeting.

7 'Children of the Rainbow' was a multi-cultural language arts curriculum developed in the early 1990s under New York City Schools Chancellor Joseph Fernandez.

BUILDING POWER

Soon after, in fall 1992, Messer and school board members came to a public meeting at PS 62. MOM packed the meeting with parents from PS 62 and other schools. But Messer responded angrily to parents' questions about school performance and walked out of the meeting. MOM members were furious at his blatant contempt for their concerns, and left the meeting determined to research their superintendent's past record and power base.

Community School District 8 Superintendent Max Messer

MOM discovered that Max Messer had been in charge of the district for almost 20 years. He was known as a man not to cross. "People jumped when they heard he was coming," recalls a former district principal. Members decided that his appointment and his regime were influenced far more by politics than by educational expertise – that he'd been put in place to run the district for the benefit of the Throgs Neck schools, and to keep those schools majority white. An investigative report by the *Village Voice* in1988, entitled "Education Plantation" had already exposed this dynamic.[8] MOM became convinced that nothing in the district would change until Superintendent Messer was ousted.

MOM began attending local community school board meetings to highlight their schools' needs and press for Max Messer's removal. The regular presence of an organized group of parents was something completely new for the District 8 school board. It was "radical," remembers Bonilla, "to attend board meetings on a consistent basis, asking to be on the agenda, questioning votes and resolutions." MOM not only attended the public school board meetings, but also went to the board's business meetings, where the public was allowed to observe but not speak. The business meetings were where "the real back and forths were happening," and MOM's presence there deeply irritated board members. "They had worked behind closed doors for so many years," explains Bonilla, "and all of a sudden they had these mamas sitting there, observing what they were doing and the decisions they were making." "Every time they turned around we were there, trying to get them to change," remembers Carolyn Pelzer.

Aside from maintaining pressure on the school board and the superintendent, Gross says, attending the board meetings was also "an amazing education for the parents who had been intimidated, to see these people in meetings and see how incompetent they were." "The way those nine people carried on and acted about our children really got me – they just didn't care," recalls Jessie McDonald. District 8's school board was notorious for its dramatics; screaming fights at public meetings were not uncommon. In one typical meeting exchange covered by the local newspaper, a board member referred to another member as a "piece of shit."[9] Board relations deteriorated to such an extent that, in response to appeals from MOM, the city Schools Chancellor asked board members to attend conflict resolution training.[10]

8 *Village Voice*, January 19, 1988
9 *Bronx News*, January 13, 1994
10 *New York Times*, November 16, 1996

As MOM's campaign to hold district leadership accountable intensified, MOM was undergoing an internal transition. MOM left BES in June, 1994 and incorporated as an independent 501C3 under the name Mothers On the Move, a name chosen by its members. BES strongly supported MOM's work in many ways, but sharing space had become an issue. MOM's two organizers were sharing a desk, and meetings could only be held when BES classes weren't in session, in a 3rd floor room that wasn't very accessible. Gross and Bonilla wanted the organization to have its own office in Hunts Point, and its own board of parents and community members.

Once they settled into their new storefront office, Gross and Bonilla hired a third organizer, Helen Schaub, and began to develop local school improvement campaigns to bring more parents into the organization and build strength for an all-out campaign against the superintendent. Parents' concerns brought them to Intermediate School (IS) 52, a District 8 middle school, where parents had recruited a janitor to take clandestine photographs showing how, as described in *New York Newsday*, "chunks of peeling paint lie on the classroom floors . . . air ducts spew brown dust . . . and when it rains, water pours through broken windows."[11] Complementing its appalling physical condition, IS 52's reading scores were dreadful: the school ranked 169th out of 179 middle schools in the city.[12] Violence was also an issue, with ten times the citywide average of 1.87 incidents for every 100 students.

MOM's storefront office on Intervale Avenue in Hunt's Point.

MOM developed a 10-point plan for improving IS 52 during the fall of 1994. They held workshops and discussions about what an ideal school would be like, and visited high-performing schools to help develop their ideas. MOM selected schools in similar neighborhoods that were academically successful – unlike the South Bronx schools. Visiting successful schools had a profound effect on members; the visits disproved the argument that it was impossible to have a good school in a poor neighborhood. To expose MOM members to different educational philosophies, organizers arranged visits to different types of effective schools, ranging from Crossroads Academy in Manhattan Valley, where students work in small groups on common projects, to the Frederick Douglas Academy in Harlem, a more traditional school where students wear uniforms and teachers direct all instruction. MOM also invited educators with expertise in improving low performing schools to speak at MOM meetings. These conversations raised parents' expectations and helped focus their fight for better Hunts Point schools.

MOM's final proposal to improve IS 52 reflected their new knowledge and sophistication about schooling effectiveness. It included suggestions for forming a safety zone around the school, splitting the school up into smaller schools within the school, using

11 *New York Newsday,* January 24, 1993
12 *New York Newsday,* April 26, 1993

more team teaching, and encouraging more parent involvement by creating a family room and holding two family conferences every year.[13]

But improving IS 52 proved difficult. In 1994, the school was placed on the list of the state's low performing schools, (known as Schools Under Registration Review or SURR), and was required to develop a redesign plan with district guidance. By working with the leadership of the school's parent association, MOM was able to influence the school's redesign plan. Focusing the campaign on the school system's redesign process, however, pulled members into lengthy redesign meetings that were often convened at the last minute, lacked agendas, and relied on educational jargon, which was rarely explained. The process was intimidating and exhausting for members. Though the final redesign plan called for subdividing the middle school into smaller school programs, it failed to define a specific role for MOM in monitoring the implementation process. When the school was subdivided, the district did little to support the development of successful small learning communities within the school.

Visiting successful schools had a profound effect on members; the visits disproved the argument that it was impossible to have a good school in a poor neighborhood.

As MOM worked in IS 52, it began exploring how to build enough power to persuade city education officials to intervene to improve District 8. Organizers saw that schools in many other neighborhoods were dealing with similar problems – poor school performance, poorly trained teachers, hostile school or district leadership, inadequate facilities, large class-size and a lack of textbooks and other classroom supplies. Resolving these issues required leverage at a city level, rather than concentrating only in one district. So in 1994 MOM, together with ACORN and other neighborhood-based organizing groups, initiated what would become the Parent Organizing Consortium (POC). Over the next several years, MOM and its allies in the POC organized protests, direct action, press conferences and accountability sessions with city education officials to fight for new schools, reduced class size in the early grades, school governance reform and increased funding for city schools.

13 *Daily News,* December 14, 1994

OUSTING MAX MESSER

In District 8, MOM's experience at IS 52 helped solidify the organization's resolve to remove Superintendent Max Messer. They attempted one last meeting with the superintendent in December 1994 to discuss their proposal for improving IS 52. Under pressure from city Schools Chancellor Ramon Cortines, Messer agreed to meet, but he refused to meet with a large group of members. So a small representative group went into his office, while a much larger crowd of MOM members waited in the hallway outside. During the meeting, Messer was dismissive of their concerns. Ignoring the educational specifics of their proposal, he said, "It doesn't look like much of a proposal," to the *Daily News*. "It has a lot of underlying principles like motherhood and apple pie."[14] His response made clear that, under his tenure, Hunts Point schools would never receive the attention and resources necessary to improve.

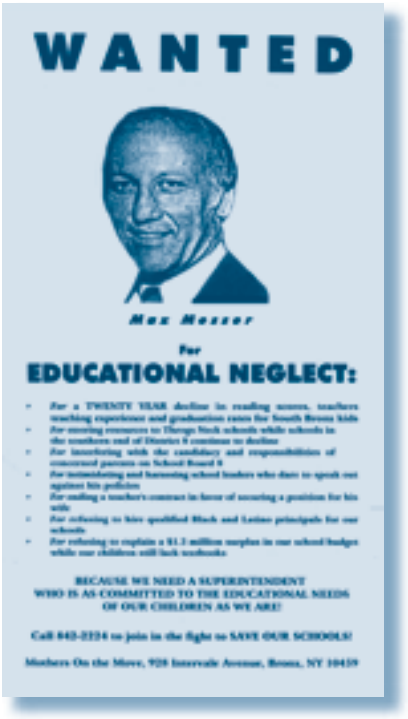


FIGURE 9
Wanted for Educational Neglect
After Superintendent Max Messer rebuffed parent's efforts to discuss their concerns about Hunts Point schools, MOM launched a campaign to oust him.

MOM pursued two main strategies in their campaign to oust Messer. In spring 1995, they appealed to Chancellor Cortines to remove the district's failing schools from Messer's control. When MOM requested a meeting with Chancellor Cortines to discuss the problems of District 8, he agreed to meet in the South Bronx. But he backed out when he learned that press would be present. Members then decided to take their concerns to him. Fifty members visited the Chancellor's house in Brooklyn Heights to demand a meeting. The demonstration received extensive press coverage, and Cortines agreed to meet. But he resigned soon after, in response to deteriorating relations with City Hall, and in October 1995, he was replaced by Rudy Crew.


The Bronx
Schools
Cortines draws fire from Dist. 8 MOMS

The transitory nature of educational leadership often imperils school reform organizing. Because their future is uncertain, local district and school officials are often unwilling to make or follow through on commitments that organizing groups demand. When new leaders are appointed, groups must start building a new set of relationships. But for MOM, the transition in chancellors in 1995 was unusually smooth. Crew came to the Bronx to meet with MOM almost immediately after his appointment, prompting Gross and Bonilla to speculate whether "Cortines had warned him that if he didn't show up, we'd visit him at home." Crew agreed to MOM's demands for improvements in school safety and a textbook take-home policy. More importantly for members, he acknowledged the problems and inequities in their schools and expressed outrage that these problems had been allowed to continue for so long. MOM members were so delighted that the meeting took on the tone of a pep rally, with chants of "Rudy! Rudy!"

14 *Daily News,* December 14, 1994

"I have a very, very clear impression of them. First of all, they were wearing particular shirts, I think their shirts actually said Mothers on the Move and they stood up and asked some pretty probing questions about things that had to do with a particular school. They also asked things about the system and that was when I noticed this very, very skillful engagement process that they had developed in which they essentially said, will you sign on this dotted line? Will you commit to making a difference? Will you commit to making these changes? Will you do what you said you're gonna do? And they had a paper that essentially said, here's what the new chancellor said he'd do. And I thought, this was both skillfully done and with the right motivation we can do it together. I remember feeling glad that there were people who had both the courage and the tenacity to stay the course in this.

New York City Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew pledges to work with MOM to improve schools in the South Bronx.

That night in the Bronx, I remember being unsettled and yet totally inspired by the enormity of heat that was generated about the problems in the Bronx and particularly in that district. I just knew there had to be a void of leadership here. I didn't know who, I wasn't in the job long enough to know the particulars around it, but I just knew that there had to have been. And it didn't take me long to make the correlation between the kinds of issues that MOM was raising, the places where they could be solved, could have been solved, could have been intervened, but weren't. So, what MOM did was to turn a light on. It was later, upon both giving Messer a fair opportunity to respond to some of this and just watching this unfold as a dynamic in front of me, that I decided, time to go."

— Former New York City Schools Chancellor Rudy Crew

In addition to pressuring the Chancellor to intervene, MOM organized locally to oust Messer. Since community school boards hired and fired superintendents, MOM decided to focus on changing the school board's composition and thus its priorities. Messer's contract expired in 1997, and MOM wanted to elect enough supporters to ensure that his contract would not be renewed. MOM had done voter outreach for the 1993 community school board elections, but they intensified their efforts for the 1996 election by creating the Mothers on the Move Community Action Alliance (MOM CAA) to work on a school board campaign. MOM CAA endorsed a slate and ran two candidates for school board, while MOM built an alliance of neighborhood groups to register and mobilize voters. Drawing on citywide relationships, it reached out for financial support from progressive activists and obtained technical and strategic assistance in the election process from the NYU IESP's newly created Community Involvement Program, a support center for education organizing groups.

MOM interviewed candidates and quizzed them about issues important to their membership, including their position on the renewal of Superintendent Messer's contract. They secured promises from three incumbent board members that, if re-elected, they would not vote for a new contract for Messer. Convinced that transforming the board was their best shot at district change, MOM organizers and members poured their energy and hopes into this campaign. They canvassed the area, knocking on doors to inform parents of their little-known right to vote in the school board elections and the impact their vote could achieve.

On Election Day, May 7, 1996, a team of members and staff monitored the polling places. In the 1993 school board elections, MOM members had discovered that two school board candidates had obtained signatures from unregistered voters, a blatant illegality, on the nominating petitions required for candidacy, so they knew how much vigilance was necessary. Their monitoring revealed a level of fraud far above what they had uncovered in 1993.

The problems focused on the candidacy of incumbent school board member Carol Trotta a Throgs Neck resident. Before the election, Trotta had announced she would not run again. When her supporters learned that MOM was running candidates, however, they fielded Trotta as a write-in candidate. As a write-in, Trotta's name should not have appeared on the ballots unless an individual voter added it. But when District 8 voters received their ballots on Election Day, many already had Trotta's name written in. MOM's allegations led to an investigation by the US Department of Justice, which revealed that three different people had written Trotta's name on hundreds of ballots. As a result, and through continued pressure from MOM, Trotta was removed from the board in April 1997.

Carol Trotta must go.

When the elections were finally resolved, MOM had won a 5-4 majority on the school board. Both MOM candidates were elected, along with the three other candidates who had pledged not to support a new contract for Messer. Voter turnout in the South Bronx more than doubled the total of previous school board elections. MOM's election victory and their exposure of election fraud heightened their

status in the district and the city. Their alliance with the school board positioned MOM to work for change from inside and outside the system.


The Metro Section

The New York Times

U.S. Sues Election Board on School District Vote Tampering

Shortly after the school board elections, MOM became involved in a citywide campaign to address the future of school boards in New York City, including the board they had just helped elect in District 8. Chancellor Crew had come into office calling for the abolition of school boards, and had taken over two corrupt boards in the South Bronx. During the summer of 1996, Crew continued pushing for school governance reform, along with the Mayor, and several city and state legislators. Their proposals called for centralizing school system power by shifting authority from school boards to district superintendents and expanding the Chancellor's power. Although MOM had just completed an all-out campaign to take control of the school board, organizers and members saw the governance reform discussions as an opportunity to push for greater schooling accountability to communities across the system. So, MOM began discussing various governance proposals.

MOM became a core member of the Community Campaign for Good Schools (CCGS), a coalition of community based organizations and advocacy groups facilitated by the IESP Community Involvement Program. Through the group, they worked for two years to push for maximum parent power in the new governance structure, and they played a key role in shaping what would become the system's official school-level governance mechanism – school leadership teams. MOM members traveled to Chicago to observe local school councils – school teams with a strong parent voice and significant decision-making power – to explore alternative forms of school management. During their visit, members began to realize that they didn't support school boards as an institution, Schaub recalls. They believed "the problem was not with decentralization but with the size of the community school districts, which made it difficult for ordinary people to have influence. Only groups with significant resources, like political clubs and the teachers union, could gain influence over the boards." The CCGS called for the creation of majority-parent school-based councils with decision-making authority over school improvement plans, budgets and principal hiring.

This proposal created tension with the school board members MOM had just helped elect, who felt that, by advocating for strong school councils, MOM was failing to support them. As months passed, the connection between MOM and their school board members eroded. One MOM school board member severed communication with the organization, while the other maintained cordial relations but stopped participating in MOM events. MOM staff believe that once inside the school system, board members faced strong pressures to conform, and began to internalize the school system's view of their community. Although both board members had previously participated in MOM actions and rallies, speaking out within the safety of a group was very different than advocating for MOM's concerns on a board dominated by Max Messer's supporters. Since only two of the nine board members

were MOM members, they also risked isolation by identifying with MOM too closely.

Maintaining the relationship with board members posed a dilemma for MOM as well. Schaub recalls, "When you decide to run someone as an organizational representative, and get them into that position, how do you define the relationship afterwards? What's the continuing relationship between the organization and the person? It's a staffing issue, too. Do you spend lots of time trying to mobilize all the supporters to go to every meeting even if nothing's going to happen at the meeting? So that was the beginning of the distance between our new board members and the organization."

In the fall of 1996, the pro-change, anti-Messer school board majority began to crumble. One of the successful incumbent candidates MOM had supported experienced a change of heart and decided she would no longer oppose the renewal of Messer's contract. She had a history of vacillation on critical issues during her previous tenure on the school board, and MOM appealed to her to reconsider. When she refused to meet, MOM members protested at her house, but eventually they were faced with a 4-5 minority on the school board.

In December 1996, the New York State Legislature passed governance reform legislation curtailing the power of Community School Boards. Superintendents became much more powerful, making MOM's campaign to oust Messer even more urgent. Because local school boards lost most of their power, especially the power to hire and fire superintendents, the school board was no longer an important target for MOM. Their focus shifted to the chancellor, who had gained the authority, under the new legislation, to appoint and remove superintendents and school administrators on the basis of what the law called "persistent educational failure."

MOM met again with Chancellor Crew in early 1997 to articulate the needs of South Bronx schools and demand Messer's removal. Members continued attending school board meetings, and highlighting the north-south student achievement disparities in the district. Later that month, when Messer announced his intention to retire, MOM members were overjoyed. The staff photocopied and enlarged his retirement letter and hung it in MOM office. It was "like liberation day in France," remembers Bonilla.


Bronx County's Most Respected Newspaper

BRONX PRESS REVIEW

Messer Packs it In: Will Leave District School Post He Held for Over 20 Years

In March 1997, Messer tried to rescind his resignation, telling the school board that he planned to stay at least another year. Under intense pressure from MOM, the Chancellor refused to let Messer take back his resignation. In a letter to Messer, Crew wrote, "It is my position that you have submitted, and the community school board has accepted, your retirement." Crew referred to "the poor performance of some of the schools in your district," and said Messer would not be assured the superintendency even if he chose to reapply. He suggested that if Messer wanted to go back on his retirement he could return to his "last tenured position as a junior high school principal."[15]

15 *Daily News*, May 2, 1997

AFTER MESSER

Messer's forced retirement generated intense citywide recognition for Mothers on the Move. He had ruled the district for twenty-one years. Local and citywide observers, friends and critics alike had predicted that Messer's removal "wouldn't happen, you're not gonna win this, he's been up there too long, he's like a piece of stone," says Lisa Ortega. When he left, MOM's stature grew even more. "The neighborhood gained a lot of respect for Mothers on the Move," Ortega recalls. "People were so afraid of Max Messer. And after we won, we weren't afraid of anything," remembers Jessie McDonald. With Messer out of the district, it seemed there would be real opportunity to improve the Hunts Point schools.

But, because at many points during the campaign it had not seemed possible to force Messer out, MOM board members had begun discussing the need to expand MOM into other issue areas. Just as MOM had made the decision years ago to expand their work from one school to the entire district in order to build membership and power, MOM members and organizers now believed they could build a stronger organization by expanding from education into other areas.

Many members believed they could not ignore the basic health and safety needs of the surrounding neighborhood. Lisa Ortega remembers, "I had to go to the doors and ask people, 'what do you think about your school? Why don't you come out to a meeting?' And they're like, 'I gotta tell you, I don't go out after 6, don't you see the drug dealers you gotta walk by coming up the stairs? Or 'girl, I haven't had heat for three weeks so don't talk to me about no school shit.' And that was very real and raw and it wasn't something we could glaze over. It was like, how are we gonna tell people to fight for their kids' education when their living conditions are this way?" At a leadership retreat in July 1996, in the midst of the Messer campaign, MOM members decided to take the organizing skills they'd gained from working on school issues and put them to work in improving other areas of the community.

"We worked so hard on the school board elections and when we lost the board majority, the notion of putting all our eggs in one basket again just didn't make sense. We had been so focused on one thing that defined the whole organization at that moment, and given that other issues kept coming up, going multi-issue seemed like a way to keep moving forward. Not to stop on education, but to keep us from being sunk like that again."

— Barbara Gross

Even members who initially were unsure about expanding to other issues have come to believe it has been good for the group. The shift has brought more people into the organization, particularly men who had not been involved in the initial schools organizing. It has allowed members to stay involved in the organization even after their children graduate from school. And the result of several years of MOM's organizing include many building improvements, forcing the city to re-route dangerous truck routes that cut through their neighborhoods, and preventing garbage from being dumped in their area.

As MOM moved into other issues, it continued citywide education organizing through the Parent Organizing Consortium (POC), pushing for class size reduction and for school governance reform. As a member of the Community Campaign for Good Schools' Steering Committee, MOM also tried to influence aspects of governance reform still under consideration after the 1996 legislative changes. While changes in the roles of the school board, superintendent, and chancellor had already been implemented, the roles that parents would play in the new structure had yet to be determined. MOM participated in citywide meetings and press events calling for a more central role for parents in the new school governance structure. When the Chancellor finally released his regulations, in November, 1998, parents were given a majority position in school-decision-making groups called School Leadership Teams (SLT), which had the power to develop and approve school improvement plans and budgets. The citywide organizing of the POC and CCGS helped MOM strengthen relationships with central Board of Education officials.

"People were so afraid of Max Messer. And after we won, we weren't afraid of anything,"

Locally, however, MOM had new problems to address in District 8. Immediately after Messer's retirement the process of selecting a new superintendent began. The school board was responsible for recommending candidates to the Chancellor, and their top choice - the only name they put forward - was Michael Kadish, the deputy superintendent under Max Messer. "You declare victory," recalls Bonilla, "and all of a sudden you have the system saying the next superintendent will be Messer's bosom buddy for the last 20 years."

MOM used the citywide stature and support they had gained from school reform organizations, advocates and activists to pressure Chancellor Crew to reject Kadish. MOM attended every public meeting about the superintendent selection. Because MOM members participated in parent associations, they were able to gain two seats on the official selection committee. MOM's influence became apparent when Crew refused to appoint Kadish and demanded that the school board send him other options. Citing the need

The result of several years of MOM's organizing include many building improvements, forcing the city to re-route dangerous truck routes that cut through their neighborhoods, and preventing garbage from being dumped in their area.

for "new energy and a new vision" in the district, Crew alluded to Kadish's association with Messer.[16] Many board members were outraged, but they were forced to re-open the process and re-examine their applicant pool. They eventually submitted another name to the chancellor: Betty Rosa, a Latina administrator, originally from the Bronx, with a doctorate in education. Rosa was the former principal of a predominantly Latino intermediate public school in upper Manhattan and though she lacked district administrative experience, she seemed the most qualified among a limited field, and MOM supported her. Chancellor Crew appointed Betty Rosa as the new superintendent of District 8 on March 13th, 1998.

Expanding into other issue areas has brought more people into the organization, particularly men who had not been involved in the initial schools organizing.

16 *Bronx Press Review,* Feb 12 1998.

“I realized in my earlier conversations with these people, Max Messer and Mike Kadish and other people in the district, that there was never quite a total truth about the story here. There was always something slightly hidden, slightly subrosa. So when Max was gone and Kadish kept coming before me I paid a lot of attention to who were his advocates, who were people who were saying you should do this. And some of them were actually board members. And I thought, this won't do. This is not an alliance that I want. This is an alliance that will ultimately be against me, not for me, or for the kids in the district. Mothers on the Move was so forceful and so vociferous about what they believed to be wrong. They knew how to draw the line between being hard on the issue and hard on people. And they were very, very, very hard on the issue. They just drilled it. They never stopped. Every time they invited me up it was to talk about the issue, every time they wanted me to sign a paper it was about a very specific set of issues, every time they wrote me a letter it was about a very specific set of issues. And you combine that with the absence of a total picture being drawn by the existing personnel in the district and I thought, it's just time for a complete change here. Everybody has to go.”

— Rudy Crew

The New Superintendent

MOM's organizing during the Messer years was based on a principle distilled from working first at the school and then at the district level: the district superintendent was essential to creating a more effective and responsive learning environment for children. MOM didn't start with this assumption; its organizing began by trying to help parents talk with educators about their schooling concerns. But within a year, the organization found itself enmeshed in tense relationships with the school principal and district superintendent, because both seemed unwilling to meet with parents about any agenda other than their own. Thus the campaign to oust and replace the superintendent developed from MOM's experience of the failure of school and district administrators to recognize and act on parents' desire for improvements in student achievement and school performance. Whatever collaboration MOM had hoped for could not possibly happen without administrators willing to recognize the legitimacy of the issues and the demands parents raised.

> We were so bowled over by Betty Rosa in the beginning. She was so much more accessible and we didn't know what to do with that. We knew there needed to be new principals, but then what?
>
> — Barbara Gross

Organizers and members understood that reversing decades of school failure required a broad range of school and district interventions, but their work helped them understand that no intervention would succeed without a superintendent committed to improving the educational outcomes of Hunts Point children. MOM's school improvement strategy thus ultimately depended on the vision, capacity and commitment of the new superintendent. When Betty Rosa was named superintendent, the organization hailed the appointment, but had little clarity about how to shift from an adversarial position to a collaborative role while still holding the superintendent and the district accountable. Though MOM members understood, from their visits to effective schools, what quality instruction and successful classrooms should look like, they weren't sure what role to play to help the district transform its failing schools.

> "When Betty Rosa came on as superintendent for District 8, we were thrilled. Particularly because Max was a white male who had been in a leadership position for over 25 years, and had allowed this inequity to go on and didn't have a clue as to what was going on in the South Bronx, or didn't care. What I liked about Betty Rosa was that she was a woman, first of all. Educated in Bronx schools. Resident of the Bronx. And I think, came with more knowledge of what it is like to go to schools in the Bronx."
>
> — Carolyn Pelzer, MOM member

BETTY ROSA'S STRATEGY

When Chancellor Crew appointed Betty Rosa, he gave her a month to develop a strategy for improving Community School District 8. Rosa recalls, "He said: 'do not just go in there. You'll have three weeks to just sit by yourself somewhere,' which I did. He made the accommodations, with a team of people. I had a transition team, which he gave me a budget for. I had 12 people – people who had knowledge of budgeting, professional development. We looked at data for the district. We looked at different elements like leadership. So I walked in with a small blueprint, a map. And that was through his guidance."

Rosa's first priority was to open a district–wide magnet middle school that would demonstrate that South Bronx children could reach high levels of student achievement. The exodus of middle school–age children from the district alarmed her, and her background as a middle school administrator made starting a new middle school a workable initiative. The school she developed, the Maritime Academy, started in September 1998 and quickly became one of the highest achieving middle schools in the Bronx. Though it draws students from across the district by lottery, the school is located in Throgs Neck. Thus, MOM's first education campaign during Rosa's administration became fighting for busing for Hunts Point children so that they could attend the school.

Rosa also established uniform schedules, programs and policies across all the district's schools, imposing consistency where before schools in each neighborhood had followed their own, often quite different, rules and norms. She introduced new math and literacy curricula and imposed new zoning and feeder patterns. She closed two schools in Hunts Point. A third school, IS 52, the focus of MOM's early organizing, was taken over by the Chancellor shortly after Rosa's appointment. Throughout this period, she openly discussed district disparities in student achievement and school performance, using the north/south imagery popularized by MOM.

Rosa quickly began removing ineffective principals across the district. Nine principals were replaced in 1998–1999, three in 1999–2000, and 11 in 2000–2001. Rosa recalls this time as a period of enormous turmoil and upheaval. Principal changes led to staffing turnover, as teachers retired or left for other schools. To fill the vacancies, Rosa developed a relationship with Teach for America to recruit new teachers to the district's schools. With the city and state increasingly focused on test scores, Rosa worried about the impact of these changes on the district's scores. "There's a price to pay for changing leadership. I 'u' rated people. I removed people. I removed board members' favorite people. When you do that, you upset communities. You also have to deal with changes in the school culture that impact on academic performance. Every time I removed a principal, I knew my scores were going to take a dip. Knowing that, I tried in the first 2–3 years to wipe out dysfunctional cultures very fast."

But Rosa was not able to wipe out some schools' dysfunctional cultures as quickly as she wanted to. Indeed, Rosa later replaced some of the very principals she had earlier

Principal Turnover			
	1998–99	1999–00	2000–01
Hunts Point	5	2	3
Soundview	2	1	5
Throgs Neck	2	0	3
District Total	9	3	11

FIGURE 10 **Principal turnover in District 8 schools**

This table shows principal turnover in District 8 schools from 1999–2001. Superintendent Rosa removed 9 principals in 1998–99, three in 1999–2000 and 11 in 2000–2001. (Data source: New York City Department of Education Annual School Reports.)

appointed. Recruiting effective administrators and teachers remained a daunting challenge, despite her relationship with Chancellor Crew and other educators across the city. Large numbers of new and inexperienced teachers negatively affected the overall climate, and probably the test scores, of too many district schools. Suspensions in Hunts Point schools peaked in 1999–2000, the same year in which the number of new teachers was highest in these schools.

Of all the District 8 schools, Rosa believes Soundview schools were most ready to accept the changes she introduced, whereas in Hunts Point, "the issues were much more complex." Rosa explains: "At 62, where MOM was very active, when I removed the principal, the staff turned over a few times until it stabilized. The new principal had to change a lot in that school. I looked at it as a prime example of shifting leadership, shifting culture, shifting population, because it has the homeless shelters there. Just a lot of change needed to take place. Finally, if you look at the scores this year (2003), you see a big difference. But after five years! The healing that had to take place in the school after the leadership transition was unbelievable."

"Some of our schools went through not one, but several principal changes after Rosa came in. The fact that principals came and went speaks to how hard it must be to replace half a dozen principals and find decent people. These schools are clearly not operating in a vacuum, they're facing what every school is facing: how do you find qualified teachers and principals?"

— Barbara Gross

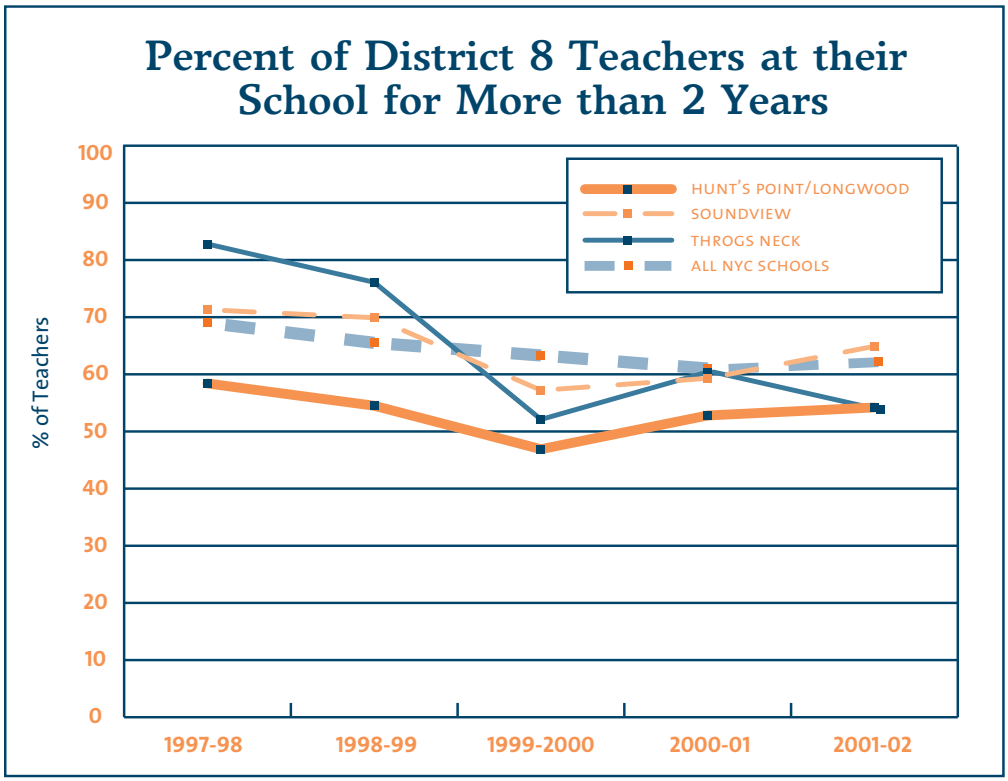


FIGURE 11 **Percent of District 8 Teachers at Their School for More than 2 Years**

The number of Hunts Point teachers with two or more years teaching in their schools was lowest in 1999–2000.

Source: NYC Department of Education, Annual School Reports.

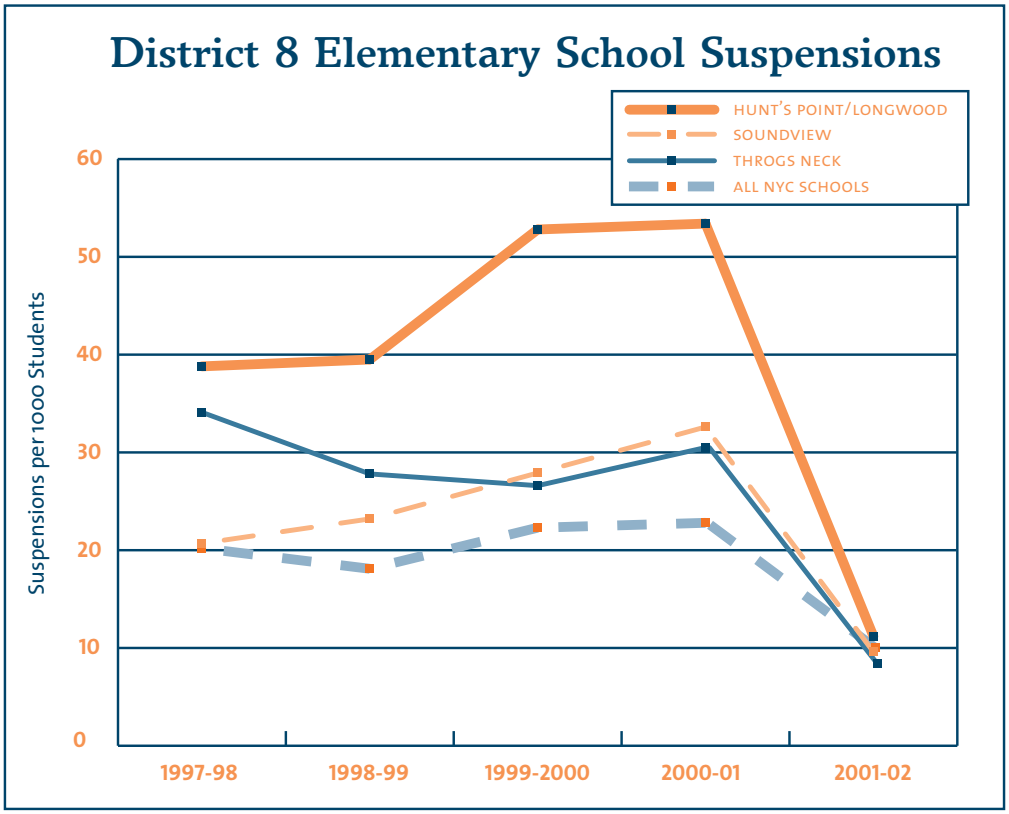


FIGURE 12 **District 8 Elementary School Suspensions**

The number of suspensions in Hunts Point schools was highest in 1999–2000.

Source: NYC Department of Education, Annual School Reports.

WORKING WITH BETTY ROSA

When Betty Rosa moved into Messer's former office in the spring of 1998, MOM members met with her almost immediately to congratulate her and share their concerns. They urged the new superintendent to focus on improving Hunts Point schools, and pushed her to remove several principals. Rosa agreed that district–wide change was necessary. MOM members recall this time as a "honeymoon" period. They wanted to give Rosa a chance to define her reform agenda and show what she could do, and they struggled to define what kind of role they should play with the new superintendent.

Internally, MOM was undergoing transitions in leadership and staffing. After five years of intense organizing, members and organizers were worn out. Many members who had been very active in the Messer campaign no longer had children in the district and were turning their attention to other aspects of their lives. Many returned to school or college to further their education. MOM organizers realized they had to rebuild MOM's base of parent members. Organizing staff also changed. Gross, and later Bonilla, left the organization and were replaced by newer organizers who had participated in the later years of the campaign to oust Max Messer.

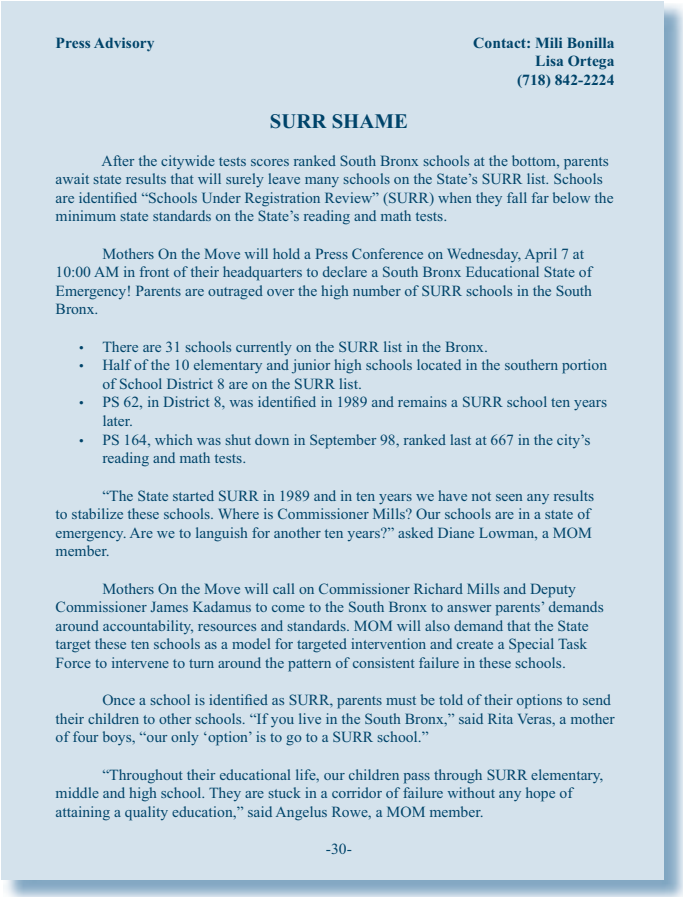
At the same time, organizing was more difficult without as dramatic and culpable a target as Max Messer, and without as clear a message as the necessity for leadership change. Essentially, MOM's strategy had been to hold the superintendent, and to a lesser extent the district's school board, accountable for the dismal academic results in the Hunts Point schools. Now that the new superintendent had acknowledged MOM's critique of poor school performance and pledged her regime to improving these schools, the dilemma for MOM was what strategy to employ. "When we were able to focus members' desire for good schools on getting rid of Messer, we were able to run a very directed and effective campaign," Schaub says. "The factors affecting the quality of education are so complicated. How do you know the kind of principal leadership you have? How do you work with experienced teachers? How do you support them? Do you fight for more money and services to help kids? We tried different approaches to answering this question, but in the end, it remained our biggest challenge."

"Betty Rosa wasn't Max Messer, so the kind of pressure tactics that we used with him—going to school board meetings, the flyers, the press, we didn't use against her. I don't remember ever marching to the district, or putting her face on a flyer."

After years of citywide advocacy on school governance, in 1999 MOM decided to focus on the newly mandated school leadership teams as a way to gain access to school improvement discussions in local schools. MOM began holding informational workshops for parents on the district's school leadership teams, and developed school–level campaigns on a variety of implementation issues, such as whether schools were adequately publicizing the work of the teams and the access to parent elections to decide team membership.

At a district level, MOM struggled to hold Rosa and the Chancellor accountable for improving Hunts Point schools while maintaining open channels of communication with them. Rosa had not articulated a coherent strategy for improving Hunts Point schools, yet she seemed to want MOM's unstinting support. Gross recalls, "She had this view that she really wanted to work with us, and what that meant was she expected we would help carry out her agenda. But we had great difficulty getting her to articulate her reform strategy, and even more difficulty understanding it and assessing whether, and how, it could work."

Although Rosa removed most of the principals MOM had identified, working with her began to grow increasingly difficult. "The only reform she articulated clearly was a magnet school plan, and MOM members didn't support that plan, especially after the first school was created in Throgs Neck," Gross recalls. Placing the Maritime Academy in Throgs Neck forced MOM to fight for busing and sowed suspicions among members about her intentions and sincerity. Her reluctance to get involved in school leadership team issues roused similar concerns. But MOM members were tired of the endless confrontations with school officials and wanted to believe they could work differently and effectively with Rosa. Having committed to developing a collaborative relationship, they were reluctant to organize against her. "Betty Rosa wasn't Max Messer, so the kind of pressure tactics that we used with him—going to school board meetings, the flyers, the press, we didn't use against her. I don't remember ever marching to the district, or putting her face on a flyer," Bonilla says.



Press Advisory

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SURR SHAME

After the citywide tests scores ranked South Bronx schools at the bottom, parents await state results that will surely leave many schools on the State's SURR list. Schools are identified "Schools Under Registration Review" (SURR) when they fall far below the minimum state standards on the State's reading and math tests.

Mothers On the Move will hold a Press Conference on Wednesday, April 7 at 10:00 AM in front of their headquarters to declare a South Bronx Educational State of Emergency! Parents are outraged over the high number of SURR schools in the South Bronx.

- There are 31 schools currently on the SURR list in the Bronx.
- Half of the 10 elementary and junior high schools located in the southern portion of School District 8 are on the SURR list.
- PS 62, in District 8, was identified in 1989 and remains a SURR school ten years later.
- PS 164, which was shut down in September 98, ranked last at 667 in the city's reading and math tests.

"The State started SURR in 1989 and in ten years we have not seen any results to stabilize these schools. Where is Commissioner Mills? Our schools are in a state of emergency. Are we to languish for another ten years?" asked Diane Lowman, a MOM member.

Mothers On the Move will call on Commissioner Richard Mills and Deputy Commissioner James Kadamus to come to the South Bronx to answer parents' demands around accountability, resources and standards. MOM will also demand that the State target these ten schools as a model for targeted intervention and create a Special Task Force to intervene to turn around the pattern of consistent failure in these schools.

Once a school is identified as SURR, parents must be told of their options to send their children to other schools. "If you live in the South Bronx," said Rita Veras, a mother of four boys, "our only 'option' is to go to a SURR school."

"Throughout their educational life, our children pass through SURR elementary, middle and high school. They are stuck in a corridor of failure without any hope of attaining a quality education," said Angelus Rowe, a MOM member.

-30-

FIGURE 13 **SURR Shame**

Calling on the New York State Department of Education to intervene in Hunts Point SURR schools, Mothers On the Move held a press conference on Wednesday, April 7th, 1999, to declare a South Bronx Educational State of Emergency.

Looking for a campaign that would not endanger local or city–level relationships but that could lead to improved education for children, MOM focused on the New York State Education Department's role in improving low performing schools. Seven of 10 Hunts Point schools were (or became) SURR, and MOM assumed Rosa would have neither the resources nor the staffing at the district level to turn these schools around. So in spring 1999, MOM asked the state to create a special task force of educators and parents to examine what could be done to improve school performance. MOM's meeting with state officials at P.S. 100 proved a pivotal flashpoint in the group's relationship

with the superintendent.

Betty Rosa recalls, "At our first couple of meetings, I felt very welcome, embraced and supported and then it turned somewhere after a year. The turning point was the meeting at PS 100. We hosted a meeting, and at the meeting, MOM asked Commissioner Mills and Assistant Commissioner Sheila Evans Tranum for a blue ribbon panel. They demanded a meeting or follow up—can you give us a schedule—and he was a little stuck. And I remember going to the podium and saying, with all due respect, this is a local issue that deserves a local response. Practically, stay out of it."

Rosa interpreted MOM's actions as a threat, rather than a request for support, even though MOM had deliberately refrained from critiquing her reforms. As a result, MOM not only failed to persuade the state to lend its support, but also exacerbated what was becoming an increasingly difficult relationship with the superintendent.

Rosa was annoyed with MOM for what she interpreted as their failure to support several of her reform efforts – few Hunts Point students were attending the Saturday school programs she opened, for example, and MOM had not helped to recruit attendees. She was also irritated by MOM's campaign to improve the effectiveness of school leadership teams. "If leadership teams are established, and I have no issue with other groups participating and calling themselves whatever, but somehow we have to create a cohesive group within the school. And MOM was not helping because here was an internal group of parents saying, 'we're not part of the leadership team, we're MOMs on the Move.' But if you really want to participate, you've got to come in and become a part of the fabric of what's going on, and let's figure out together how to solve it."

While more open than Messer, Rosa seemed to have replaced his pattern of denigration of student capacity and dismissal of community concerns, based on demographics, with a dismissal of community input based on the primacy of professional knowledge. The result was that the low performing schools were still denied the kind of public assessment and dialogue that might have helped them improve.

Rosa's increasing anger stemmed from her perception that MOM was constantly "throwing rocks at my window" rather than helping "me clean my windows so our kids could see a clearer tomorrow." Every meeting with MOM was "always about well, this isn't working and I said, 'tell me something that is working. It can't all be negative.'" As a schools expert and the educational leader of the district, Rosa believed she had the sole responsibility and authority to define district policy. She was furious when MOM stepped outside the role she had defined for them. Bonilla recalls, "Educators always took our organizing very personally, as opposed to the police department, or the department of sanitation, or even landlords. Educators thought any critical action we took would reflect badly on them and their reputation in the system – they didn't see themselves as having to answer to the people. When we targeted the department of sanitation and protested outside the commissioner's home, never did we get a letter saying why are these people doing this?"

Unaware of the depth of Betty Rosa's anger, MOM kept trying to find ways to work collaboratively with her. This work was led by members and organizers whose ideas about how to negotiate with district officials were formed during the organization's struggle with Messer. Many of Messer's staff were still working in the district, and working with Rosa meant working with some of the same people who had earlier opposed MOM's efforts. Thus MOM's organizing methods and tactics were deeply influenced by their fear of losing their ability to hold schools, and the superintendent, accountable.

The growing conflict between Rosa and MOM dramatized the enormous difference between educators' and parents' understanding of who the schools were ultimately accountable to, and therefore, who could legitimately define the terms of school–community collaboration and dialogue. It was a gap that, ultimately, neither side was able to bridge.

Over time, MOM came to believe that Rosa had either been co–opted by Throgs Neck leaders, or was in over her head in trying to run the district. Members reported cosmetic improvements, which they welcomed. The schools looked cleaner and there was toilet paper in the bathrooms, but the data showed little change in student achievement. Convinced they needed to develop a specific reform strategy, in 2000, MOM decided to conduct a community school review. "It was hard for parents to really understand what was happening inside the school," Schaub says. "Parents didn't work in the school. They didn't go to school there. The problem was how to get detailed information about what was happening inside the school so parents could make sure that what was going on was serving their kid." Schaub explains: "We were never clear what our relationship should be with Rosa, and how we should deal with her. The theme became, how do we hold her accountable? The school boards had no power, which we didn't think was necessarily a bad thing, but there wasn't something that replaced them at a district level in which parents were directly involved. Particularly when she was saying, I'm trying and I'm doing all these million things. And people began to say, hey wait a minute, maybe you're not always right, maybe you have to listen to parents, maybe these things you're trying aren't working. But she was working hard to put up a smokescreen and it was hard to break through that. That's when we decided to do the community school review."

The community school review was modeled after New York State's School Quality Review process. To conduct the review, a group of eight parents, community members, and outside educators would spend three days inside some of the district's low–performing schools observing classes, examining curriculum, following students, interviewing staff and parents, and visiting non–classroom areas such as the cafeteria and playground. The review was designed to serve as a critical friend to the school, and engage staff and administrators in constructive dialogue about the school's strengths and what needed improvement.

MOM and Rosa negotiated for a year about the community school review, and dozens of school reform allies across the city supported MOM's efforts. In early 2001, Rosa refused MOM access to the schools. Rosa insisted that the decision about the school review should be left up to individual principals, while MOM maintained that Rosa was in charge and should use her position to encourage principals to accommodate the review.

MOM knew the schools would be defensive, given their history of failure, and would refuse to allow the review if the decision was theirs. From MOM's perspective, Rosa's stance legitimated a pervasive view among educators that community representatives had no role in insuring accountability, and that assessing school effectiveness and recommending school improvements were solely internal schooling functions. While more open than Messer, Rosa seemed to have replaced his pattern of denigration of student capacity and dismissal of community concerns, based on demographics, with a dismissal of community input based on the primacy of professional knowledge. The result was that the low performing schools were still denied the kind of public assessment and dialogue that might have helped them improve.

MOM ultimately implemented a modified community school review, by integrating school visits into a ten week training program and preparing parents to observe their own children's schools and interview their teachers. Since MOM was barred from sending groups of parents into the schools, they relied on whatever limited access individual members could achieve. As a result, though members gained a valuable leadership development experience, the review failed to generate an agenda for improving specific schools. Schaub recalls, "We had thought we could go into two schools and develop a list of what was working and what was not, along with a set of recommendations for improvement. And that's what, ultimately, we didn't have."

Assessing Ten Years of Organizing

How should an organizing strategy aimed at improving low performing schools or districts be assessed? Certainly, MOM's achievements are many. MOM's organizing has transformed district politics, priorities and practices, and influenced the development of new capacity for effective instruction within Hunts Point schools. The group exposed the disparity in achievement and resources between the schools serving the north and south in District 8, ended Throgs Neck's domination of the school board, forced Superintendent Max Messer out of the District after 20 years and influenced the selection of his replacement. MOM forced the district to operate more transparently, and collaboratively with parents, helped improve leadership in several Hunts Point schools, and won an increase in the number of textbooks distributed to students. Members and organizers built an organization strong enough to win improvements in housing and environmental conditions in addition to education. Their work helped legitimize community organizing as an important school reform strategy in New York City and nationally, and inspired parents across the country to organize for better schools.

The personal transformation among MOM members is without doubt among MOM's most profound achievements. Members' growing awareness of their power to intervene in local and citywide political processes to change the circumstances of their lives, and the conditions of their community, echoes throughout MOM's membership. "In the long run," Jesse McDonald says, "I know that I can go out in my community and fight for what we need and for what's right."

But as community groups organizing for school improvement across the country acknowledge, the ultimate measure of any organizing campaign must be the extent to which student achievement and school performance measures increase. Using this yardstick, MOM's work has led to clear gains. PS 62, the school where MOM began, has shown a gain of over fifty percent on fourth grade reading tests since Rosa came to the district. As Figure 14 shows, fourth grade reading scores rose from 22% to 36% between 1999 and 2003. Although this is still unacceptably low, the steady progress suggests that more gains will evolve; Superintendent Rosa predicted the sharp increase from 2002 to 2003 and insisted that, as the school's instructional culture stabilizes, test score results will continue to rise. PS 140, another Hunts Point school, has also shown steady improvement over the past five years. In that school, the percentage of fourth grade students meeting the state reading standards doubled, from 9.8% in 1999 to 20.8% in 2003.

Test score results in Hunts Point schools as a whole have improved slightly between 1999 and 2003. Figures 15-16 show that Fourth grade reading and math test scores generally followed the results

Fourth Grade Reading Test Results in PS 62 1999–2003

YEAR	LEVELS 3 & 4
1999	22.0
2000	22.8
2001	27.6
2002	28.4
2003	35.9

FIGURE 14 **Fourth Grade Reading Test Results in PS 62, 1999–2003**

Levels 3 & 4 refers to students scoring at or above the state standard.

Source: New York City Department of Education, "Results of the State ELA and City CTB–Reading Tests, Grades 3,4,5,6,7 and 8. 1999–2003 District 08."

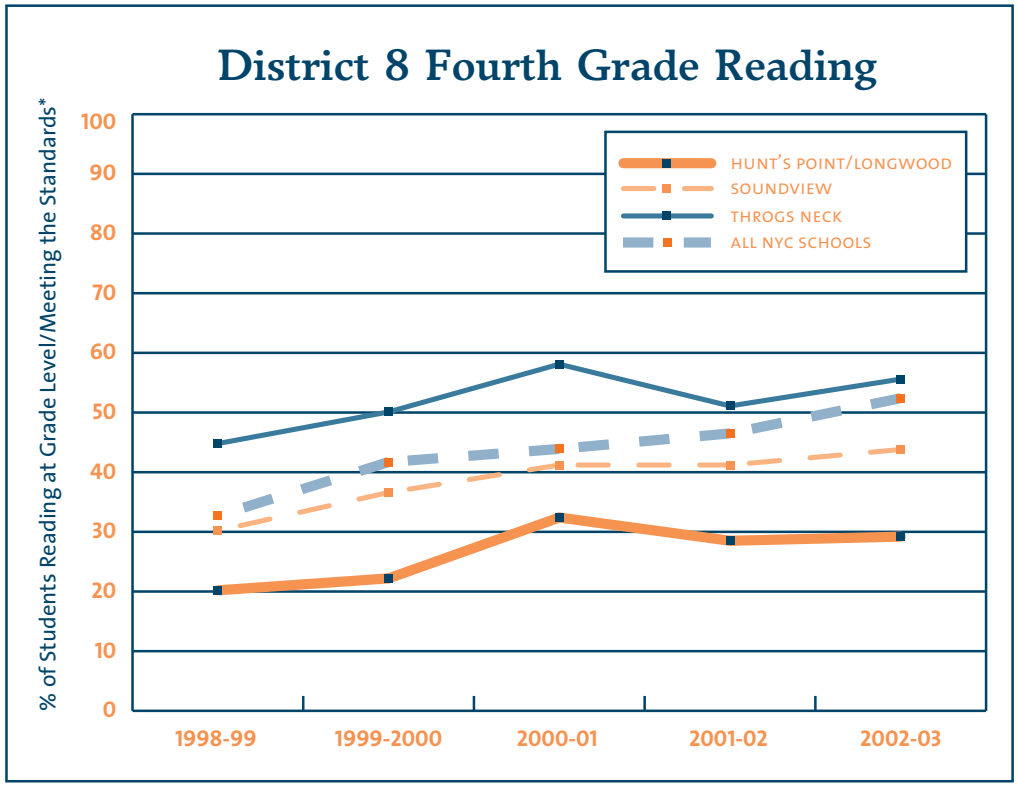

FIGURE 15 **District 8 Fourth grade reading test results, 1999–2003**

** Meeting the standards means a score in Level 3 or 4 on the NY State and City reading tests.*

Sources: NYC Department of Education, 2002-03 City and State Test Results published in June 2003.

of citywide test score trends, though Hunts Point scores remain below those of the other District 8 neighborhoods.

Because they work outside their target schools, organizing groups' interventions are always mediated by educators — sometimes the educators groups seek to replace or, at a minimum, compel to improve their practice. Organizing groups can't force teachers to teach better, or make principals more effective. Given this intrinsic limitation, organizing groups are forced to define and manage an ever–shifting balance between broad accountability pressures and specific school improvement demands. They must also negotiate an equally fluid balance between confrontation and collaboration with the school and district administrators and educators who ultimately determine what happens in the classroom. Given these complex tensions, what are the legitimate expectations of organizing campaigns to improve low performing schools?

If we judge MOM by its campaign objectives, it certainly succeeded beyond what anyone in the organization, or in the city, believed was possible. The new superintendency brought about through MOM's organizing led not only to principal replacements in Hunts Point schools, but also to changes in staffing, curriculum and organization in these schools. If Betty Rosa is right in asserting that Hunts Point schools needed time to heal from the wounds caused by decades of poor leadership and the resulting turmoil caused by her

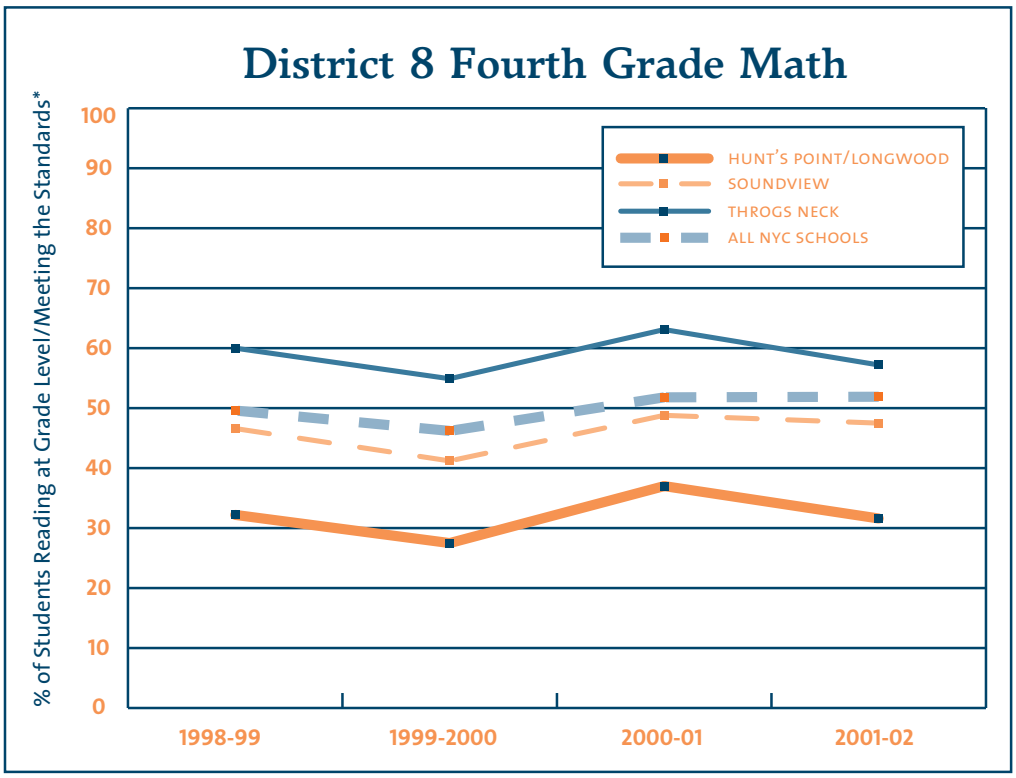

FIGURE 16 **District 8 Fourth grade math test results, 1999–2002**

** Meeting the standards means a score in Level 3 or 4 on the NY State and City math tests.*

Sources: NYC Department of Education, 2001-02 City and State Test Results published in July 2002.

widespread leadership replacement and staff turnover, then we may yet see dramatic improvement in these schools.

After an initial concentration on PS 62, MOM's campaign for leadership accountability focused on district change, which it saw as crucial to systemic school improvement. But when Rosa came into the district, they were never able to define an effective partnership with her administration. Though organizers and members visited successful schools, reviewed research on education reform, and met with numerous education experts, they also were never able to conduct the in–depth analysis of their own schools necessary to develop their own strategy for school improvement. Without such inside access and knowledge, it became harder to assess the strengths and limitations of Rosa's reforms – or to offer more direct pressure or support for change in specific areas of individual schools.

From IESP's perspective, the challenges facing MOM's work during Betty Rosa's administration raise important lessons for others engaged in school reform organizing:

First, improving low performing schools requires developing effective working relationships with educators based on bottom–up accountability. The top–down and professionalized culture that characterizes educational bureaucracies discourages principals and other administrators from directly admitting schooling problems and working with

community groups to resolve them. At the same time, the reflexively oppositional stance that organizers are often trained to take towards schools prevents them from exploring less polarizing ways of defining critical schooling issues. In this conflicted and over–determined environment, organizing groups need to view confrontational and collaborative postures as tactics in a broader strategy to develop school–community relationships based on joint definitions of the focus, terms and desired outcomes of the partnership.

Second, given the difficulty of attracting effective administrators and teachers to low performing schools and districts, organizing groups can not afford to rely solely on macro level systemic change strategies like leadership change, although these strategies are certainly crucial to reform. Organizing groups must couple leadership accountability and policy change with specific school–level strategies. Though parents and organizers cannot (and probably should not) try to duplicate the knowledge and skills that educators have amassed, organizing groups need to develop some basic knowledge of local school effectiveness, as well as of indicators of necessary areas of improvement, as part of their organizing strategies.

Third, if access to schools is critical to developing a strategy for instructional improvement, and ensuring that it will be implemented with some fidelity, organizing groups need to focus on cultivating relationships with educators, not only in the school reform community, but also in the schools they hope to change. Building such relationships requires a concerted effort to break down the barriers of defensiveness, fear, and condescension between schools and communities that prevent educators from allying with and lending their professional expertise to support these audacious struggles for change.

Ultimately, MOM's history demonstrates both the power, and the complexity, of community organizing for school reform. It is a new day in the district–there is a new openness, transparency, and engagement of parents and community. The district is still healing however, not only from the distrust, secrecy and division of the Messer years, but also from the intensity of conflict required to force Messer's departure and the radical staffing changes that followed. If Betty Rosa's term in office was a period of transition necessary to creating the possibility of new school–community relationships today, then MOM's most potent intervention may be not simply the removal of an ineffective superintendent, but the reshaping of the district's culture to enable far-reaching changes to occur during Rosa's administration and beyond.

MOM's story is ongoing and filled with paradox. The current PS 62 principal, for example, actually attended the 2003 MOM Annual Assembly. The organization is presently working with district and city education officials, and local school administrators and staff to develop school–community partnerships focused on classroom and school improvement. MOM has also organized a collaboration with several community organizing groups to research effective models of bottom–up accountability in other school districts, develop a New York City–specific format, and advocate for its adoption. The struggle – for effective forms of community–based power to hold schools accountable for producing quality education for all our children – continues.

Appendix

DISTRICT 8 EIGHTH GRADE TEST SCORE RESULTS

Hunts Point 8th grade test results declined in reading between 1999-2002, and improved in math during those same years. Although there are 3 middle schools in the Hunts Point area, only one Hunts Point middle school, MS120, had 8th grade test result data for these years. IS 52 and MS 74 were moved into the Chancellor's District at the beginning of Betty Rosa's superintendency and later closed.

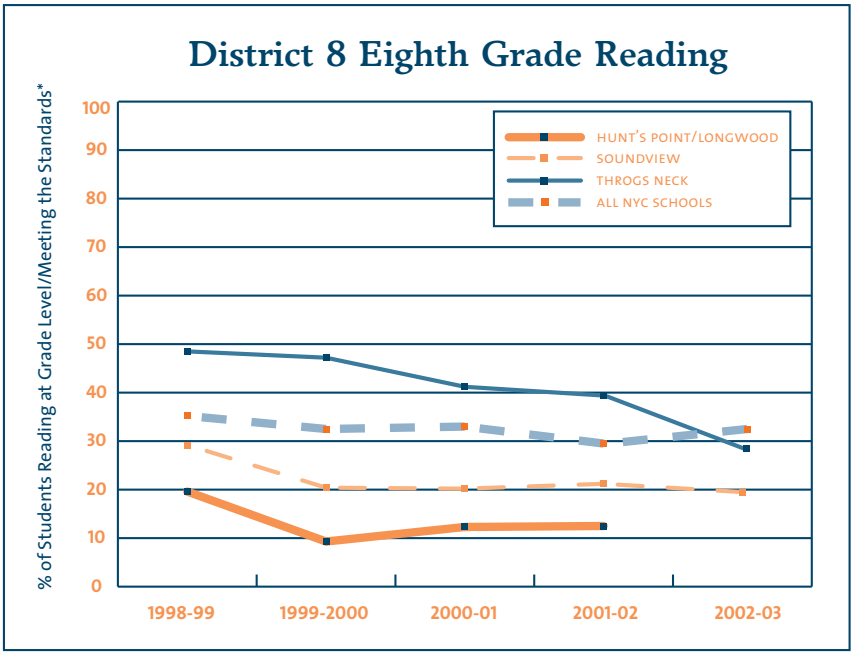

FIGURE 17 **District 8 Eighth grade reading test results, 1999–2003**

** Meeting the standards means a score in Level 3 or 4 on the NY State and City reading tests.*
Sources: NYC Department of Education, 2002-03 City and State Test Results published in June 2003.

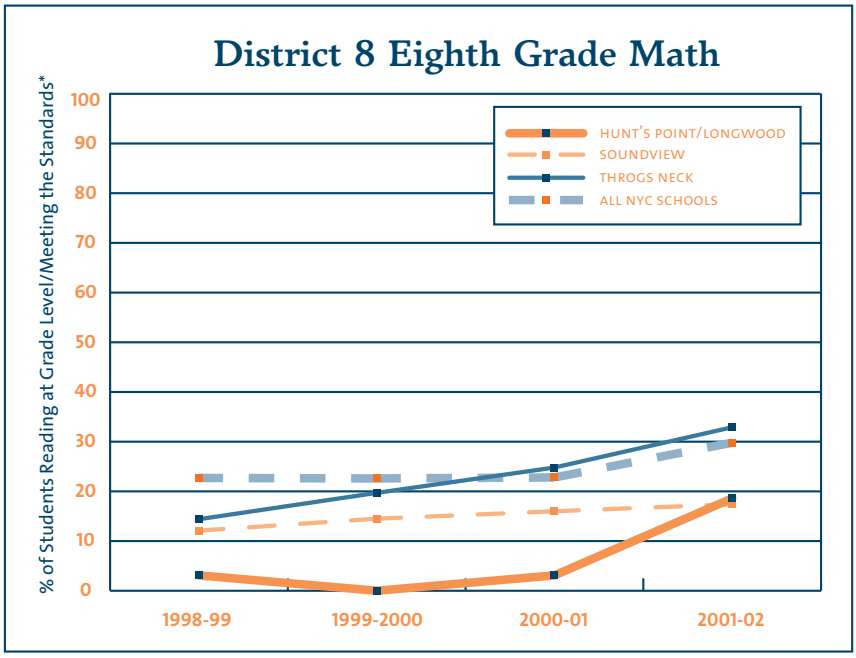

FIGURE 18 **District 8 Eighth grade math test results, 1999–2002**

** Meeting the standards means a score in Level 3 or 4 on the NY State and City math tests.*
Sources: NYC Department of Education, 2002-03 City and State Test Results published in July 2002.

NOTES ON DATA ANALYSES

All neighborhood aggregations are weighted averages based on the number of students or teachers, where applicable. Data on teacher stability and student suspension rates were compiled from multiple Annual School Reports (ASRs): Data for 1997-98 through 1999-00 are from the 1999-00 ASRs; data for 2000-01 and 2001-02 are from the 2001-02 ASRs. MS 101, considered a Throgs Neck school, was a new school in 2000 (no teachers were present for 2 years or more); thus, it is not included in the 2000-01 aggregates for Throgs Neck. The aggregated 2001-02 suspension rates for Hunts Point are based on only 3 out of the 7 HP schools because the other 4 were missing data for that year.

Fourth and eighth grade reading test results are from the 2002-03 City and State Test Results published in June 2003 (available at www.nycenet.edu/daa). 4th and 8th grade math results are from the 2001-02 City and State Test Results published in July 2002. Only one Hunts Point school, MS 120 had 8th grade test result data for the years presented, and the reading results were missing for 2002-03.

RELATED INSTITUTE PUBLICATIONS

The following related documents are available on the Institute's website, www.nyu.edu/iesp:

Mediratta, K., N. Fruchter, and A.C. Lewis. *Organizing for School Reform: How Communities Are Finding their Voice and Reclaiming their Public Schools.* October 2002.

Mediratta, K., N. Fruchter, et.al. *Mapping the Field of School Reform Organizing: A Report on Education Organizing in Baltimore; Chicago; Los Angeles; the Mississippi Delta; New York City; Philadelphia; San Francisco; and Washington D.C.* August 2001.

Zachary E., and o. olatoye. *A Case Study: Community Organizing for School Improvement in the South Bronx.* March 2001.

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